

**EROTIC POETICS: LOVE AND THE FUNCTION OF US LITERATURE FROM  
MELVILLE TO MODERNISM**

by

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The dissertation argues Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Jean Toomer, and Wallace Stevens belong to a genealogy of what I call “erotic poetics.” I use these terms to identify the common set of resources I believe these writers leave to the present. For this genealogy, “poetry”—from the Greek *poesis* (to make)—encompasses the expansive set of enterprises by which humans create and transform ourselves and our worlds in time. These writers also consider human love, or *eros*, a category worthy of attention when questions of self- and world-making are at stake. I argue the genealogy of “erotic poetics” develops a historical, material, and secular vision of human life grounded in these terms. I trace its continuities and ruptures by making observations about the language, formal innovations, and historical circumstances of several significant American novels and poems, including “Song of Myself,” *Pierre; or the Ambiguities*, and *Cane*.

In each chapter, I turn these observations toward a set of contemporary challenges we face today in the US and elsewhere. These include democratic crises at home and abroad, the ecological disasters we associate with climate change, and the struggles for liberty that continue to take shape in opposition to an ongoing history of race violence in the US. The dissertation argues we can best approach these problems if we view human life in the ways the tradition of imaginative literary writing I identify offers. Although many critics have found in these writers’ works materials that support projects of mythic nationalism, I argue the tradition to which they belong also contains elements that destroy those projects. The dissertation identifies

these elements and suggests they are of special value today. The genealogy gives us ways to challenge those who continue to insist humans should not interfere with the powerful and invisible forces many argue we cannot influence.

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION: EROTIC POETICS AND THE FUTURE**

In President Obama's 2015 State of the Union address, he describes our present as a pivotal moment. The US has in recent years faced "terror touching our shores," fought "two long and costly wars," and seen "a vicious recession."<sup>1</sup> The present, Obama admits, is "a hard time for many." Despite these challenges, however, Obama believes the US can "turn the page" on the past. He urges Americans to turn our hopeful and creative energies toward the future: "At this moment—with a growing economy, shrinking deficits, bustling industry, booming energy production—we have risen from recession freer to write our own future than any other nation on Earth. It's now up to us to choose who we want to be over the next 15 years and for decades to come." Obama encourages us to be decisive, and he does so by orienting us in time. He sets aside the troubles of the past, points us toward the future, and invites us to see the present as the crucial moment for action. He claims we enjoy a special, creative liberty right now, and urges us to recognize our human power to shape (or "write") our world.

In the face of perpetual war, mounting economic inequality, and fundamentalist violence, it is difficult to agree with Obama that we have "turned the page" on the global challenges contemporary political and economic conditions produce. It also seems unlikely we are freer than ever before. Yet, Obama seems right to suggest these conditions demand we pose anew a familiar set of questions. What kind of futures do we want, and how do we create them? How does the present look from the perspective of a future our actions might create? This mode of

inquiry has always been popular in the US.<sup>2</sup> More broadly, it has distinguished the ways the West thinks about and organizes human life in “modernity,” as Hans Robert Jauss argues in his careful etymological study of the concept.<sup>3</sup> If we still believe this way of understanding human activity serves us, modernity’s questions seem as urgent as ever.

The dissertation responds to the vital questions present inequalities and dangers provoke through a sustained engagement with American literary writing. The project suggests the works of American writers of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries might today animate attempts to imagine and create worlds contemporary challenges, to which I return in a moment, foreclose. The dissertation’s title—“Erotic Poetics”—names the resources I believe a genealogy of American literary writing leaves to such projects. I argue Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Jean Toomer, and Wallace Stevens develop a sense of “poetic” activity that can serve attempts to imagine increasingly democratic futures. For Whitman and the others, “poetry”—from the Greek *poesis* (to make)<sup>4</sup>—names the expansive enterprise by which humans create and transform ourselves and our worlds in time. Poetic activity, these writers suggest in different ways, requires the human faculties and capacities we associate with imagination, emotion, and the senses. Each therefore considers human love, or *eros*, a category worthy of attention when questions of *poesis*—of self- and world-making—are at stake. These writers differ from those who argue violence and torture, on the one hand, or reason and technology, on the other, are privileged categories of human enterprise. I return to both of these conceptual domains, the “erotic” and the “poetic,” below.

I believe this tradition of American writing deserves attention today because it opposes some of the dangerous and popular ways of thinking about human life, and about its future, many in the US and elsewhere endorse. Despite the apparent political polarization US media regularly

reports, US elites on the right and left seem to share certain assumptions about the kind of future Americans want and about the activities we should (and should not) pursue to create it. The federal budget proposal is one of the preeminently modern genres of our time, so a look at two recent documents gives us a sense of these common ambitions and methods. In 2014, Senator Paul Ryan and a group of House republicans released *Path to Prosperity*, a budget they claim laid out “a blueprint for the country’s future.” This “blueprint” for a “brighter future” would “stop spending money we don’t have. It would help create jobs and expand opportunity. And it would restore the promise of this exceptional nation.”<sup>5</sup> To create such a bright and exceptional future, the Ryan budget recommends we “protect the country from threats” by increasing federal spending on national defense.<sup>6</sup> It also recommends we “restore fairness and vitality to our economy” by abandoning the range of established state regulations House republicans believe “distorts and misdirects the flow of capital in the free market.”<sup>7</sup> Because certain state activities interfere with the beneficent and natural ways markets organize human life, this language suggests, we should abandon regulations, limit environmental protections, and eliminate or reduce many of the programs we associate with the Welfare State.

Although President Obama’s 2015 State of the Union address, and the budget proposal for 2016 he released just after it, explicitly claims to attack this way of thinking, he and many US democrats have since the Clinton administration supported policies similar values shape. The *New York Times* called the Obama budget proposal a “utopian vision” for the left.<sup>8</sup> Yet, this budget allocates significant funding for defense and champions new wars overseas. Obama agrees with the right that threats to national security are especially extreme today and are likely to continue indefinitely. He proposes the US make permanent funding available for ongoing wars with nonstate actors he believes are unavoidable.<sup>9</sup> The Obama budget, which proposes we spend

more on basic domestic infrastructure and entitlements, explains its agenda of “middle-class economics” in almost populist terms. At the same time, the budget endorses policies that aim “to enhance [...] access to capital markets” and promote “economic policy adjustment” amongst “sovereign international partners.”<sup>10</sup> Both US parties thus assume, more or less explicitly, markets operate according to a benevolent logic states should not restrict. Both also suggest violence is a privileged activity by which states can establish the conditions for free markets. Not only US elites hold these views. They are popular in the US.<sup>11</sup> Recent polls demonstrate a majority would agree that “free markets” produce “free people,” as a *Wall Street Journal* editorial recently put it.<sup>12</sup>

Political economists writing in the European tradition associate this dominant way of thinking with “neoliberalism.” As David Harvey writes in his standard overview of the term, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, neoliberal elites in the US and Europe have since the 1980s pursued across fields the policies of “deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of state from many areas of social provision” US politicians on the left and right continue to advocate.<sup>13</sup> They do so, Harvey argues, in the name of a constrained vision of human life that claims “individual entrepreneurial freedoms” are more important than all other liberties. A search for the word “free” in Ryan’s budget shows the logic of this worldview at work. House republicans worry about “free markets,” “free enterprise,” and “risk-free interests rates” throughout the document. They do not use the word “free” to describe activities that are not economic. The liberty neoliberals defend is a special brand of economic liberty, and the state’s function is to establish by any means necessary the conditions for its possibility and then step out of the way.

Events since September 11, 2001 suggest these policies might not lead to liberty, security, and prosperity for many, however.<sup>14</sup> A growing majority in the US and across the globe

has come to feel life is increasingly dangerous and unstable.<sup>15</sup> The systematic deregulation of the financial sector, underway since the 1980s, in 2008 caused the crisis Obama calls a “recession.” Its effects, as he admitted, continue to be felt by many today, although not by most of what the *New York Times* calls Wall Street’s “giants of finance.”<sup>16</sup> In the name of liberty, the Bush and Obama administrations have funded a “Global War on Terror” the state admits is not likely to end.<sup>17</sup> Both administrations have sent troops into combat zones and discarded established civil liberties at home.<sup>18</sup> The state has developed and deployed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles the continuing strikes of which some argue encourage the fundamentalist attitudes they supposedly combat.<sup>19</sup> It has also practiced brutal “enhanced interrogation” techniques against actors held in extrajudicial spaces.<sup>20</sup> The most popular worldview in the US authorizes torture, wages perpetual war, and places an absolute faith in an economic system that, economists demonstrate, ensures a global majority will remain impoverished.<sup>21</sup>

If, as evidence suggests, market logics do not create the “fair” worlds and “bright” futures many believe they will, liberatory projects compel ways of thinking that challenge the faith of the day and what Etienne Balibar has called its “topography of cruelty.”<sup>22</sup> The dissertation argues the genealogy of American literary writing I trace responds to this need in at least two ways. First, I claim these writers develop ways of thinking that counter the metaphysical views of the world state and nonstate actors invoke to sanction violence. Neoliberal thinking cedes to inhuman forces—to the benevolent logic of unfettered markets—the sphere of political action. The poets and novelists I read affirm instead the historical, material, and secular views of human life I explore in each chapter. The genealogy, I claim, helps create what Jauss calls “historical self-consciousness,” a sense that human life changes over time according to the specific ways epochs imagine themselves in relation to their pasts.<sup>23</sup> As Jauss demonstrates, this sense changes

too, so the dissertation touches the different senses of history these writers develop in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The genealogy also demonstrates an increasing commitment to materialist views of the world and human life. Here, I use the word “material” in the widest and most common contemporary sense of the word—“of or relating to matter or substance; formed or consisting of matter. In early use: earthly.”<sup>24</sup> As do the formidable, post-Enlightenment moderns who continue to influence epistemological projects today—I am thinking of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Darwin—Whitman and the others attempt above all to conceive of human activity in earthly terms. Their work is thus also “secular” in a broad sense; it is “of or pertaining to the world.”<sup>25</sup> These writers are wary of the supernatural and transcendental, and they try instead to approach the human in ways that “adhere to reality,” as Wallace Stevens puts it.

As this group imagines human life anew, the dissertation argues it develops a sense of “poetic” or “imaginative” activity importantly different from the transcendental visions of the literary romantic writers such as Wordsworth and Emerson invent. A principle aim of the dissertation is therefore to distinguish these writers from some of their predecessors. In so doing, the project opposes the claims of such critics as M.H. Abrams and Marjorie Perloff, who believe we best understand Whitman, Melville and Stevens as poets who reproduce and remain faithful to elements of Christian theology. I identify instead the worldly understanding of literary writing that unites them.<sup>26</sup>

The genealogy, I argue, opposes those who today insist humans should not attempt to interfere with the powerful and invisible forces many argue we cannot influence. Such economists as Thomas Piketty and Paul Krugman demonstrate this “free-market fundamentalism,” as Krugman calls it, exacerbates global inequalities and frustrates democratic

desires around the world. Given these conditions, arguments for secular, historical, and materialist visions of human life—such as those Whitman, Toomer, and the others offer—are as valuable as ever.<sup>27</sup> Yet, it is controversial to say so in the field of literary studies. Humanists and social scientists associated with what some call “the postsecular turn”<sup>28</sup> argue we should no longer celebrate the “secular” as a category of value. A recent issue of the journal *American Literature* is devoted to this thesis. In the introduction to the volume, guest editors Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman urge scholars of American literature to abandon secular projects and adjust their scholarly practices so that they are “more neutral in relation to religion.”<sup>29</sup> Because they claim arguments for secularization will “always skew in favor of Euro-Christian subjects, thereby riveting rather than rescuing us from Eurocentrism,” Coviello and Hickman call for methods that “unwrite secularist presumption.”<sup>30</sup> They argue post-secularists pursue an important progressive agenda because they affirm “difference” and “mak[e] planetary inhabitants full subjects of history.”<sup>31</sup>

I believe these critics are right to argue Americanists should respect difference and consider all “planetary inhabitants” subjects “of history.”<sup>32</sup> I also agree that Eurocentrism continues to define many contemporary critical narratives in ways literary critics in the US and Europe do not always recognize. In the wake of World War 2, Frankfurt School intellectuals Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer warned intellectuals to be on guard against the triumphant master-narratives that license in the name of science, reason, and civilization violence against a range of others both outside of and within Europe.<sup>33</sup> Mounting anti-Semitism in Europe and continuing race violence in the US demonstrate those warnings remain urgent in our present.<sup>34</sup> The idea that one can decenter Europe and affirm difference by celebrating such metaphysical systems of belief as religious “orthodoxy” promotes seems counterintuitive,

however. As Bruce Robbins recently argued in “Why I Am Not a Postsecularist:” “The postsecularists are antiauthoritarians. But their anti-authoritarianism is disingenuous, since its effect is to make room for appeals to divine authority, which outranks all others.”<sup>35</sup> Divine authority, Robbins emphasizes, does not accommodate difference. Should critics devoted to plurality, then, celebrate traditions that insist upon absolute truth and supreme authority?

Robbins also joins other contemporary intellectuals on the left who remind us that the legacies of Western thinking the eighteenth century leaves to the present are not simply reducible to the dangerous universalisms critics and scholars should continue to attack. Some threads of Enlightenment thinking also promote democracy and freedom, concepts we still turn today to the interests of many individuals and collectives. As Arif Dirlik recently argued against unreflective celebrations of diversity, the “answer to problems of public enlightenment is more enlightenment, not willing surrender to oppression and bigotry in the guise of cultural difference.”<sup>36</sup> With Dirlik, I believe it is possible to privilege some of the elements we associate with Enlightenment thought while remaining wary of others, so the dissertation does not uncritically embrace a unified vision of rational, secular modernity. Instead, it considers the elements of the modern projects US poets and novelists invent and preserve (such as a commitment to a worldly and material sense of the human), as well as the elements they destroy and abandon (such as a faith in reason that discounts emotion and the senses). The violent world to which religious and market fundamentalisms contribute demonstrates this brand of critical evaluation is needed now. That violence might also give critics and scholars who argue we should abandon the “secular” reason to reconsider.

Whitman, Melville, Stevens, and Toomer also challenge contemporary “cruelties” in a second way. They value and make cases for human activities “love” and imagination animate. I



believe this attention to “love” as a category worthy of consideration when questions of the future are at stake opposes the notion that brutal violence is a privileged means to achieve the economic freedoms elites desire. As these US writers try to conceive human life in increasingly material terms, each imagines specific kinds of love motivate creative human activity. The forms of poetic love they invent are distinct. Their very different works do not present a unified, conceptual vision of love. As the chapter outline below demonstrates, the dissertation asks what “love” means for each of these writers, and explores the ways in which each joins it with a different sense of the poetic.

At the same time, these poets and novelists approach love and poetics in a few common ways. I call this tradition of poetics “erotic” because its writers all celebrate love for finite, particular, and earthly things. They also suggest such love is a creative human force. They therefore join and transform a longer tradition of thinking about human love that moves from Plato to Sigmund Freud. In classical Greek usage, *eros* differs from *philia* (friendship) and from *agape*, the form of divine love New Testament writers favored.<sup>37</sup> “Erotic” love is more potent (and creative) than *philia*, and it animates earthly activities *agape* excludes. While *agape* or “charity” (Latin *caritas*) by definition abandons or sets aside all earthly interests and investments,<sup>38</sup> writers ground “erotic” love in life on earth, even when they imagine *eros* inspires transcendental experiences or comes to us from God. In *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and other dialogues, for instance, Plato figures *eros* as the force or power that moves humans to make. Excited by *eros*, we give “birth” to children, ideas, and poems.<sup>39</sup> For Plato and those that follow him, *eros* motivates a number of creative human enterprises. In the early twentieth century, Freud adapted this classical view to his psychological and physiological theories of the human. The “Eros of poets and philosophers” Freud writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “holds

together all things living.” It is the “life instinct” Freud believes impels sexuality and a range of other libidinous activities, and he sees its power in the reproductive physiological activities of organic organisms and cells.

Although the American genealogy I trace does not share Plato’s love for the ideal or Freud’s instinctual view of human life, it shares with both the sense that love or *eros* is a creative, earthly power. Throughout the dissertation, I argue Stevens and the others believe love can (although it does not have to and often does not) move us to create our worlds and selves in time. These writers therefore invite us to imagine love’s function is historical and poetic. Given this difference, the genealogy invents and values erotic narratives that differ from those Plato urges philosophers to pursue and from those certain strains of Christian discourse endorse. Plato suggests human love at its best guides us beyond contingent and finite things and toward the transcendental ideal. Similarly, Paul suggests in his *Second Letter to Corinthians* that the divine most deserves human love and that divine love best inspires human activity on earth. The genealogy of erotic poetics moves away from these narratives. Instead, it practices and performs various modes of loving attention or engagement particular to historical human creation.

I explore these different forms of love in four chapters. Each is devoted to a text in which a poet or novelist uses a language of love to elaborate the function of literary or poetic activity. Each also distinguishes the forms of love a writer celebrates from some of the other forms of desire, attachment, or emotion that shape American life. Such texts as “Song of Myself,” *Pierre*; *or the Ambiguities*, *Cane*, and “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” imagine poetic forms of love that differ from and sometimes counter other allegiances that compel people to create (or destroy). The forms of love and hate that shape America’s past often extend into our present, so the chapters argue these writers help us address specific contemporary problems in different

ways. Toomer, for example, imagines throughout *Cane* an “art” that could challenge race hatred and liberate the creative potentialities he sees its violence obliterate. He suggests love and imagination can counter this violence, so music and poetry are uniquely suited to this task. I argue Toomer’s *Cane* thus speaks to a present in which many still do not believe “black lives” are worthy of love.<sup>40</sup>

Because the genealogy celebrates love, it also contests the significant threads within Enlightenment thinking that privilege rational faculties over emotion, imagination, and the senses, as such foundational liberal thinkers as John Locke and Immanuel Kant do.<sup>41</sup> The writers I bring together participate in a tradition of modern writing that reevaluates several of the abject terms in a set of the West’s foundational binary oppositions. I have in mind the historically and thematically capacious range of discourses that renders bodies, emotions, feelings, affects, sensations, and experiences abject. This range is too broad and rich to review here.<sup>42</sup> In general, the Western tradition has since Plato associated these categories with finitude, contingency, and uncertainty, all terms that describe the lamentable and impoverished state of mortals. It has privileged instead the rational faculties, a set of human capacities Enlightenment thinkers associate with the divine and the ideal.

By surveying love or *eros*, a figure each chapter demonstrates writers have long associated with sense, emotion, and imagination, the dissertation contributes to a tradition of thinking that has over the last two centuries challenged these oppositions. Because artists and intellectuals have often connected this work to projects for gender equality, I consider the dissertation a feminist project. I make this claim despite the fact that I have only included writers who identify as men. In the US, as elsewhere, men have historically enjoyed freedoms others have not, and perhaps this is why some of the significant figures in the tradition that celebrates

the erotic as a category of creative freedom are men.<sup>43</sup> In an expanded version of the dissertation, I would include chapters on Emily Dickinson, H.D., and Toni Morrison. Doing so would offer a fuller picture of the US genealogy I trace than the current project can.

Feminist artists and intellectuals have since the late eighteenth century pioneered attempts to revalue terms long excluded from serious thinking about the human, and the dissertation contributes to this history.<sup>44</sup> This is, in part, because Western canons treat many of the terms Whitman, Melville, and others love and value (especially the “body,” the senses, and the emotions) as “feminine” in a pejorative sense. Mary Wollstonecraft lamented in 1792 that women were often left “entirely dependent on their senses for employment and amusement” and so were unable to “curb the wild emotions that agitate a reed over which every passing breeze has power.”<sup>45</sup> For Wollstonecraft, women seemed emotional, sensual, and self-interested at least in part because of the social conventions that shaped their lives. Scientists writing a century later still believed, as did philosophers writing centuries before, that these devalued qualities and behaviors were inherently feminine. Sigmund Freud hoped psychoanalysis might finally distinguish the essentially masculine from the essentially feminine in ways the science of anatomy could not. He deployed his theory to explain those “character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women:” “that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility.”<sup>46</sup> These views are still active today, although it is difficult to prove just how negative valuations of women, on the one hand, and of the feelings, senses, and imagination, on the other, persist. Studies that show far fewer women than men hold political office in the US might suggest they do,<sup>47</sup> as might those that show universities and state institutions have secured increased funding for the sciences (fields

associated with reason and knowledge production) and decreased funding for the arts and humanities (fields associated with imagination and the senses).<sup>48</sup>

Contemporary philosophers and theorists such as Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva continue to work against these oppositions today. These and other feminist writers not only attempt to challenge the notion, which still impedes projects for equality in our present, that sex and gender determine behavior in the familiar ways Freud lists. They have also attempted since the 1960s to transform the ways of thinking that render one category of human experience abject and another privileged. Irigaray, for instance, has argued in various ways across a long and controversial career that “analytic knowledge is probably man’s weakest resource if it is cut off, on the one hand, from a receptive affect or sensoriness, and, on the other, from the imagination as a synthetic faculty.”<sup>49</sup> She believes what she calls “subjective liberation and development” require we account for all of these elements of human life.<sup>50</sup> I believe the dissertation contributes to the broader set of ambitions such feminist writers as Irigaray have long considered vital for liberatory aims.

Because the poets and novelists I read are committed to historical, material, and secular views of the human, they take seriously the realities, possibilities, and constraints we associate with emotion, imagination, and the senses. The genealogy accounts for and affirms these categories in various ways. It insists the sensory pleasures we associate with art, sex, and many of the other activities Locke, Kant, and others exclude from moral and rational enterprises are worthy of love, and can therefore play a role in the pursuits by which humans shape futures. Perhaps most importantly, these writers suggest it is possible to love language as a sensuous material. The lover of language accepts what the idealist tradition laments—words cannot represent “reality” in all of its fullness. For Whitman, Stevens, and the others, this insight is

cause for celebration, rather than grief, because the poet's beloved material turns out to ground a creative power that exceeds representation. Language transforms through sound and sense—that is, not only through mimesis and reason—human thinking and action. It is therefore both an instrument of loving, creative activity, and a material worthy of love itself.

The dissertation's account of this tradition also participates in broader conversations about “love” underway today. As a concept, “love” is enjoying renewed attention right now. It has moved out of the orbit of Freudian and Lacanian analysis that dominated twentieth-century discussions of love and its adjuncts, sex and desire. Critics and social scientists now invoke “love” for projects, which, as mine does, look to the “erotic” and its conceptual terrain for resources that might serve contemporary political interests. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman laments the ways our “liquid modern world” dissolves the loving bonds we formed in the past, turning love itself to a “liquid” that moves as the flows of global capital move.<sup>51</sup> Philosopher Alain Badiou praises “love” as a bulwark against finitude and argues we must bring previous transcendental accounts of its power “back to earth.”<sup>52</sup> Marxist theorist Michael Hardt proposes intellectuals invent a “properly political concept of love” he believes might counter capitalism's relays of desire and consumption. Political scientist Martha Nussbaum, who places herself in the tradition of liberalism, argues liberal democracies should consciously aim to stir feelings of love the way fascist regimes have in the past.<sup>53</sup> “Affect” theorists—social scientists and cultural studies scholars interested in “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion”—also invoke “love” for a range of projects.<sup>54</sup>

“Erotic Poetics” shares certain aims with some of these projects and differs in important ways from others. I share with many of these writers the sense that “love” and its histories might

speak to the political needs of the present. At the same time, I want briefly to distinguish my work from two of these significant projects. First, the dissertation approaches the erotic differently than do those social and political scientists who use theoretical language to invent, describe, and promote new forms of love. Hardt's "For Love or Money" and Nussbaum's *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* typify this orientation. Although Hardt and Nussbaum envision different political futures and argue different forms of love might produce them, both share the sense that philosophers or social scientists can theorize an appropriate or desirable form of "political" love others might then feel. Hardt, for example, describes a love "three qualities" define: it would destroy "conventional divisions between public and private," "operate in a field of multiplicity and function through not unification but the encounter and interaction of differences," and it would "transform us," or "designate a becoming such that in love, in our encounter with others we constantly become different."<sup>55</sup> These characteristics seem laudable and possible. One can imagine feeling a love of this kind for others, if one does not already. Hardt's prose does not inspire one immediately to feel the "properly political" love he describes, however. Indeed, the notion that one could arrive at an appropriate conception of love and then present it in the language of theory seems to counter Hardt's apparent celebration of the emotions and their value for politics. Hardt's theoretical discourse does not make use of sound and rhythm. It does not appeal to the senses. Traditions of poetry and rhetoric rely upon precisely those sensuous qualities Hardt abandons to rouse love and move interlocutors. Instead, Hardt deploys language as a transparent medium for his ideas. Nussbaum's recent book does the same. Can such forms, which emerge from and appeal only to the rational faculties, really inspire the kinds of radical, transformative love those who describe them desire? I do not believe they can. The dissertation, itself a work of theory, looks instead to a tradition of poetry and imagination for

a sense of erotic possibility. By reading literary texts, I am able to describe the various forms and sensuous features by which poets have expressed, inspired, and performed the novel forms of love they invent. I do not attempt to advance a rational argument for any particular form of love.

Second, the dissertation approaches love from a perspective that differs from the methodological and disciplinary approach associated with “affect theory.” Although “affect theory” is a popular discourse many social scientists and cultural studies scholars today use to talk about the broad category of experience that includes feelings, emotions, sensations, and “affects,” I choose not to use its special language. This is in large part because affect theory does not claim language, my primary object of study, is *its* object of study. Rather, affect theory claims to study “affects” themselves. As the editors of *The Affect Theory Reader* put it, their methods stage a “turn away from the much-heralded ‘linguistic turn’ in the latter half of the twentieth century [...] and often toward work increasingly influenced by the quantum, neuro-, and cognitive sciences” (7). While contemporary calls to reconsider conventional disciplinary and epistemological boundaries between the humanities, social science, and natural science inspire me, I do not believe humanists can or should set aside questions of language in order to forge new methods and epistemological possibilities. This is because the study of language supports the humanistic tradition’s historical understanding of human life, a view other epistemological and disciplinary formations do not endorse. Dominant cognitive science paradigms, for instance, today understand the human as a species largely determined by genetic material and biological constraints.<sup>56</sup>

The theoretical and methodological choices I make serve this historical view of the human. Each chapter devotes careful attention to the material forms writers create with language. I draw from these observations conclusions that turn the works of the past toward the needs of



the present. A tradition of twentieth-century criticism that moves from Erich Auerbach to Edward Said inspires readings of this kind. These critics associate attention to form, style, and language with historically philological methods. Their interest in the stylistic and sensuous properties of texts therefore differs from the interest advocated by pioneering New Critics Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren,<sup>57</sup> the villains of most stories about US literary criticism in the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> In contrast to a criticism that explicitly recommends readers set aside “historical background” and “ethical” concerns when they approach a literary text<sup>59</sup>—aims New Critics did not in fact (and often did not even try to) accomplish—Auerbach, Said, and others attend to a text’s poetic features for admittedly interested reasons. These critics assume human life is historical and draw from that insight the significance they assign to language forms. As Said puts it in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, “the historical world is made by men and women, and not by God.” The world can therefore “be understood rationally according to the principle formulated by Vico in *New Science*, that we can really know only what we make, or, to put it differently, we can know things according to the way they were made.”<sup>60</sup> The view Said here draws from Vico encourages readers to engage with language as an historical material. If we can know about literary texts, and, more importantly, if through literary texts we can come to any conclusions about human life, this knowledge requires attention to the made thing, the poetic object humans have shaped in time. Historical engagement and formal attention are therefore complementary critical acts. We need not oppose attention to form and to history, as both the legacies of New Criticism and of its later, reactionary counterpart, the “new historicism,” sometimes encourage readers to.<sup>61</sup>

The dissertation draws from this critical tradition its modes of attention to history and language. It also borrows from Auerbach and from Walter Benjamin the sense that critical work

of this kind should explicitly serve present interests. As Walter Benjamin writes in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke).”<sup>62</sup> For Benjamin, the historian or critic cannot recreate the past in all of its fullness; we can only turn the past toward needs defined by our time and place. Auerbach emphasizes this at the end of *Mimesis*, his imposing study of literary form and reality in the Western tradition. We “see” the past “from the present,” he writes, “and specifically from the present that is determined by the personal origin, history, and education of the viewer. It is better to be consciously than unconsciously time-bound.”<sup>63</sup> Auerbach’s sense of history guides the chapters that follow. I attempt throughout the dissertation to draw from care for language, form, and literary history conclusions that serve the contemporary life. In “Contemporary Democracy and Walt Whitman’s Poetics of Love,” for instance, I argue Whitman’s erotic poetry can be a resource for contemporary democratic movements as they confront climate change and the increasing disparities markets produce. I suggest Whitman’s claims for the radical instability of the relationship of the human to reality, as well as his sense that we can create this relationship anew with love and care, might inform our thinking.

This approach to literature and to literary history differs in a few important ways from some of the methodologies that dominate American literary studies today. The dissertation opposes those conservative critics who believe literary study should (or can) be a disinterested endeavor. In American literary studies, Harold Bloom and Stanley Fish are still the most well-known, and perhaps the last recognizable, figures of this kind.<sup>64</sup> Bloom, after T.S. Eliot, has since the 1970s argued we can best understand literary history as a narrative that unfolds in a transcendental realm where great authors confront and best their literary fathers.<sup>65</sup> Against Bloom, the dissertation considers the reading and writing of literary texts a worldly activity,

pursued at particular times in particular places, the realities and constraints of which critics must consider. Fish, on the other hand, regularly defends in the *New York Times* his opinion that academic writing in the humanities cannot and should not try to achieve political ends, a view he expounded at book length in 1995.<sup>66</sup> Fish is correct, in my view, to point out that many of the activities contemporary literary critics believe are political do not have the effects they desire. I do not believe one must therefore accept Fish's conclusion that academic work should embrace its place on the margins of contemporary life.

My approach also departs from, and challenges, some of the dominant methodologies contemporary critics of American literature believe serve progressive political agendas. The events of the Cold War inspired professional readers on the left to question and abandon practices—such as the New Criticism—that retreated from political concerns and historical questions. Since the 1970s, critics and scholars have invented a number of practices by which they pursue specific political agendas. These include the range of approaches we associate with cultural studies (gender studies, working class studies, critical race studies, sexuality studies, disability studies,) and with the “new historicism.” Established methods of this kind control discussion. Each of my chapters therefore enters the political conversations that surround each writer: Whitman critics are primarily interested in sexuality; Melville and Toomer scholars in questions of race and identity; and Stevens' critics in questions of class. There are important differences between these conversations and the approaches they represent, so each chapter includes a review of relevant work. For the purposes of this introduction, however, I want briefly to sketch the common set of “political” interests literary studies scholars share and the methods they suggest serve them.

To establish a sense of this common view, one can look to the documents the profession uses to report and describe its own methods and accomplishments to itself. Duke University Press's annual *American Literary Scholarship* has for the last fifty years summarized all significant peer-reviewed books and articles published on major and minor American literary writers in a given year, so its entries provide a representative overview of popular investments and methods. A recent entry (2012) for "Melville," an important figure in the dissertation, indicates the nature of these.<sup>67</sup> As reviewer Peter Norberg synthesizes books and articles over the course of seventeen pages, he uses the word "political" or one of its variants sixteen times. His summary suggests critics invoke the "political" in two primary ways for the purposes of literary study. First, critics employ it as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it primarily. "Political" literature might be explicitly "concerned with the form, organization, and administration of a state, and with the regulation of its relations with other states."<sup>68</sup> Scholars interested in Melville's biography consider the author's remarks on governance and the state during his lifetime. They also consider the ways Melville's texts represent the significant political events of his time (the Civil War, for example), either implicitly or explicitly.<sup>69</sup>

Most often, however, *AmLS* suggests the word "political" designates for critics a range of activities and fields associated with the more diffuse senses the OED lists.<sup>70</sup> Norberg, for example, uses the word "political" to describe three recently published monographs that consider Melville—Christopher Freeburg's *Melville and the Idea of Blackness*, Robert Azzarello's *Queer Environmentality*, and Richard Hardack's *'Not All Together Human': Pantheism and the Dark Nature of the American Renaissance*.<sup>71</sup> Although these books pursue different aims, they all claim to take up "political" projects. Hardack "reevaluates" pantheism, which, he argues, "plays out the identity politics of white men."<sup>72</sup> Azzarello is interested in the "politics of human

sexuality,” which he connects to concerns about the destruction of the environment.<sup>73</sup> Freeburg studies the trope of blackness in Melville in order to draw connections between racial politics in the US and Melville’s “figurative blackness.” Each of these monographs claims to explore the ways literary texts shape and challenge normative ways of thinking about human identity. Each therefore claims “culture”—rather than the state or the economy—is a privileged arena for transformative “political” activity. These books suggest that the critical work of explicating how texts accomplish these “political” ends in turn serves a similar function. As Freeburg writes in his introduction, he believes Melville’s fiction “makes ‘the establishment’ unhappy and unsettled,”<sup>74</sup> and implies his book might do the same. For these critics, “political” projects challenge powerful cultural forces that repress or render abject marginalized identities.

Since the 1980s, a number of critics and scholars have worried approaches of this kind might not achieve the political effects the critics who deploy them desire. Edward Said, Wendy Brown, Joseph Buttigieg, Paul A. Bové, Jonathan Arac, and others have argued in different ways that criticism turns away from the explicit domains of political activity that require attention and thought today when it assumes the realm of “culture” is a primary space for action.<sup>75</sup> These other domains include the state and the economy, neither of which cultural studies often addresses nor attempts to transform.

This alternate critical tradition informs the dissertation, which approaches contemporary political questions in a more fragmentary and tentative way. I do not attempt to develop a new political methodology I could apply to all texts, nor do I attempt to establish a fixed relationship between literary or poetic texts and political activity. Rather, the project asks how each text speaks differently to the present. It also questions contemporary assumptions about the relationship between the political and the poetic by reconsidering how the genealogy of writers I

trace put these terms in conversation. For Whitman and Stevens, for instance, the political is poetic. As I argue in Chapter 1, this statement differs from the obverse claim (the poetic is political), a view I believe can only celebrate literary works when they argue for explicit political agendas.<sup>76</sup> Intellectuals on the right and left who do not value the poetic as a category of human activity might not be able to recognize it as a resource for creating the alternate futures scientists, economists, and journalists today insist we need.

I argue a tradition of “erotic poetics” explicitly considers the questions away from which contemporary elites turn and privileges creative activity over violent destruction. Although critics have invoked Whitman and Melville for imperial US narratives, I argue all of the writers I read also present to us radically different ways of thinking that oppose those stories. The dissertation is therefore genealogical in a double sense. Not only does it claim these writers belong to a common trajectory of poetics. It is also genealogical in the special sense Foucault uses the term in the essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” Genealogy, Foucault writes, “does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us.”<sup>77</sup> The dissertation makes visible discontinuities within the history of modern American thinking about the future and how we make it. The chapters that follow demonstrate these writers, each of whom critics have claimed in the 1920s, 1940s, and 1970s for various projects of mythic national identity, also contain elements that destroy those projects.<sup>78</sup> I suggest Whitman and the others at different historical moments refuse to believe in transcendental forces, oppose the violence by which we often seek to serve them, and pursue instead material and loving forms of world-making.

Over the course of four chapters, I track the evolution of erotic poetics as each writer develops it. The chapters emphasize radical differences in style and historical context at the same time as they trace a progression. Chapter 1, “Contemporary Democracy and Walt Whitman’s Poetics of Love,” claims Whitman originates the most explicitly erotic view of imaginative activity in the Western tradition. He significantly transforms romantic notions of the imagination Coleridge and the German idealists first articulate. I return to the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and to the poem we now call “Song of Myself” to elaborate the erotic force Whitman understands poetry to be and the material sense of human life he offers through his songs. I argue this view of the poetic can serve contemporary democratic movements.

In Chapter 2, “Herman Melville’s Erotics of Reading,” I argue Melville invents in *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* and “Hawthorne and His Mosses” a distinct vision of the literary he sets against transcendentalism and industry, other practices dominant in the antebellum US. I call his mode of literary practice, which Melville suggests is animated by love for human others and for the world, an “erotics of reading.” In *Pierre*, he insists literary writers should not attempt to present timeless truths or contribute to the industrial projects the novel parodies. He challenges the vision of “truth” he believes transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson share with technocrats such as Zadock Pratt. Although many intellectuals and writers understood these positions to be in conflict in Melville’s day, he views them as complementary, and, as the triple murder-suicide that concludes *Pierre* indicates, dangerous. Melville offers as an alternative to these truth discourses a set of reading and writing practices he grounds in love, fidelity to which I argue shapes the novel’s tortuous form and carries Melville’s famous review of Hawthorne. In “Hawthorne and his Mosses,” Melville performs an erotic literary encounter he argues allows writers and readers to consider what “can be humanly known of human life.”

Chapter 3, “Beloved Language and Historical Violence in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” claims that Toomer grounds the tentative vision of art his singular literary achievement elaborates in a kind of love he distinguishes from the other erotic motivations he sees dominate US life in the early 1920s. For Toomer, the artist wields tremendous power to transform a world plagued by modern ills. Misdirected appetites, misplaced faith, and enervating bourgeois proprieties organize and inhibit the forms of life Toomer’s artists find in Georgia, Washington, D.C., and Wisconsin. Toomer imagines the artist can, out of a radical love different from the passions that animate sex, faith, and marriage, counter these elements. Toomer hopes to share with and inspire in readers ways of caring passionately for the world, the self, and others these activities foreclose. At the same time, he recognizes, as many of his contemporaries do not, the limitations of an idealist view of art’s power, the failure of which *Cane* stages in a number of vignettes.

In Chapter 4, “Wallace Stevens’ Love Poems for the Earth,” I claim Stevens achieves in his poetry after 1940 a fully secular and historical conception of the erotic poetics Whitman originates. In poems such as “Excerpts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” and *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, Stevens challenges the view of *eros* Platonic idealism and Christian mythology invent. This tradition requires the human lover turn his or her passion toward the divine and regard as abject all forms of earthly love. Stevens conceives love instead as an earthly force that inspires humans to create. Love motivates a poetics that brings the mind to illusion (“supreme fiction”), rather than the “soul” to “truth.” At a moment defined by the great pressures of modern war and by the loss of transcendental fantasies, Stevens’ poetry accomplishes its feats of loving creation through “the sound of words.”



## 2.0 CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY AND WALT WHITMAN'S POETICS OF LOVE

In the “Preface” to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman proclaims his commitment to liberty and announces the powerful love that motivates it. The poet of democracy is “the complete lover” of “the universe.” He creates his experimental forms out of an earthly and sensual passion, and so joins a genealogy of writers who say love or *eros* animates their work. The erotic element of Whitman’s early poetics has long seemed to readers one of the greatest resources Whitman offers those who pursue projects of liberty in modernity. This has been true not only for US audiences, who embraced Whitman’s late, explicitly imperial works before they did the obscene and astonishing Whitman of 1855.<sup>79</sup> It has also been true for transatlantic and hemispheric readers who turned to Whitman at decisive political moments. Jose Marti, the Cuban poet and intellectual, celebrated Whitman’s love as Marti called for democratic revolution in Cuba in the late nineteenth century.<sup>80</sup> Thomas Mann invoked Whitman’s erotic vision in 1922, when Mann defended republicanism in Germany against rising fascist forces.<sup>81</sup> Although D.H. Lawrence preferred the word “sympathy” to “love,” he turned Whitman’s erotic charge against the imperial US narratives on export under Woodrow Wilson.<sup>82</sup>

I believe Whitman’s erotic poetry can be a resource for us again today, as democratic and liberatory projects confront the formidable challenges of the contemporary. This chapter briefly identifies a few of these—chief among them climate change and increasing economic

inequality—and surveys some of the solutions writers on the right and left propose we pursue in the present. As I demonstrate, some conservative leaders argue democratic movements are in danger in the twenty-first century because democratic states cannot adequately perform basic administrative tasks. They therefore suggest, as Tony Blair recently does in the *New York Times*, states improve their administrative practices and invest in technological innovation. Others argue contemporary global capitalism and its effects threaten democracy today. Economists, journalists, climate scientists, and others believe we should reevaluate the most basic assumptions about human life in order to imagine and produce the futures popular ways of thinking foreclose. I propose the vision of human life Whitman elaborates in the first *Leaves of Grass* can support efforts of this kind. In 1855, Whitman suggests humans create themselves and their world in time, a process he calls “poetry.” Poetic creation is, for Whitman, as powerful as the other material processes to which he renders it equivalent, and love, a material force he believes emerges from a deep, evolutionary history, animates it. Whitman’s poetics of love thus offers an alternative to the right’s vision of the present, which bolsters elite interests, sanctions state violence, and cedes the field of political action to nonhuman logics. In order to claim that poetics as a resource, I suggest we set aside some of the dominant critical approaches critics on the left make to Whitman today. When critics champion Whitman primarily as an activist for sexual liberty, for instance, they do not always recognize the more radical possibilities for poetic (and political) transformation Whitman leaves to the present. In the sections that follow, I turn to “Song of Myself” for a sense of these possibilities. The chapter demonstrates how a materialist reading of love in Whitman’s poetry can build upon the existing projects of literary critics on the left.

## **Practical Management Solutions and “Dead” Democracies**

A search for the word “democracy” in the *New York Times* “Opinion Pages” suggests democratic movements are in crisis across the globe. A small sample of the headlines published between October and December 2014 indicates the nature and scope of the trouble: “Israel Narrows its Democracy”; “A Threat to Spanish Democracy”; “Sore Losers Spite Indonesia’s Democracy”; “Plutocrats Against Democracy”; and “Is Democracy Dead?”<sup>83</sup> The list indexes the many corporate, religious, racial, and nationalist interests that threaten rights in both long established democratic states and in those established after WWII. Israel votes to limit rights to Jewish citizens; wealthy Catalan wants to secede from austere Spain; Indonesia’s old guard consolidates electoral processes and terminates local elections; American states impose unnecessary voter ID laws; and Hong Kong’s authoritarian leadership fears the policies that would follow were impoverished populations able to vote.

Does some common element unite these diverse and specific challenges to liberty? Moreover, if it does, how might we address the problem? An emerging narrative on the right offers one answer to these questions. Conservatives suggest democratic regimes today face what former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair recently called an “efficacy challenge.” Blair’s editorial in the *Times*—“Is Democracy Dead?”—sketches with broad strokes an account of the present other champions of free market policies (among them the well-known conservative intellectual Frances Fukuyama) share.<sup>84</sup> According to this view, democracy is imperiled today because it fails to manage what Blair calls the “mainly...nonideological business” of contemporary governance. Democratic bodies cannot administer the “technical nuts and bolts” modern states require. This democratic management crisis is so dire, Blair argues, “some autocracies” today

serve “the needs of their citizens” better than democracies can. Though admirable and “obviously right,” democracy is its own worst enemy.<sup>85</sup>

This narrative is familiar. It reprises the argument a tradition of political and economic thinking that stretches from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman promulgates.<sup>86</sup> This tradition, the most recent proponents of which political economists call “neoliberals,”<sup>87</sup> holds that free market capitalism is rational, benevolent, and inherently liberatory. Political action or regulation harms capitalism, the logic of which would otherwise order life effectively for all populations. Blair describes the world of business and industry as the “real world” and claims policies that privilege free markets are “nonideological.” The “private sector” is from this point of view a privileged ontological space—a reality—inaccessible to any entity that would attempt from outside of it to regulate or challenge its aims and operations.

Given this basic understanding of what is “real,” Blair proposes two kinds of human activity can help us meet with “practical solutions” the “sense of malaise and disillusionment with democratic politics” he believes pervades the globe in 2014. He celebrates administrative and managerial expertise, on the one hand, and technological innovation, on the other. These two fields of activity will together shape the future neoliberals desire. Blair entreats competent administrators to step in to “improve” and “modernize” the “implementation” of democracy. He argues such managers should foster “greater interchange between the public and private sectors,” elect “leaders” who “have real-life experience” in the private sector, and “take measures to stimulate growth.” These sensible leaders should also clear away the barriers to modernization and efficiency such “interest groups” as “teachers’ unions” erect. Blair believes these “nonideological” measures will allow technological innovation, the form of activity he values most, to “transform” and “revolutionize” life in all fields. “Technology alone,” he writes, “could

transform the way education and health care work,” if only we could remove the bureaucratic failures that impede technology’s power. Paired with “effective decision-making through strong leadership” (a “missing element” in the US, UK, and Europe, presumably since Blair, and his US counterpart George W. Bush, left office), Blair believes technological development will give larger numbers of people access to the “basic services” they need.

This appeal to pragmatism and efficiency seems at once innocuous and sensible, but recent news (and recent fiction<sup>88</sup>) demonstrates the language of “nonideological” “efficacy” Blair invokes, and the view of contemporary life it confirms, is neither. Since September 11, 2001, for instance, states such as the US have justified as necessary for their basic functioning a range of enterprises. The controversial “Torture Report” the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released in the US the same month Blair published his reflections demonstrates these have included torture.<sup>89</sup> This fact alone calls into questions Blair’s claim that the efficacious management of state affairs can ever be “nonideological,” a conclusion the history of Germany’s National Socialist party also supports. Good management is compatible with torture, death, or genocide. It allows for state violence and so for the politics of hate upon which the policies that license hate rest.

More, those who celebrate what Naomi Klein has called “market logics” mischaracterize both the nature of the challenges liberty today faces and the nature of the activities by which humans can create futures that are more democratic and equitable.<sup>90</sup> Two of the most ambitious and significant books published in the US this year offer competing narratives each supports through wide-ranging and novel research methods. Journalist Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* and economist Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* each establish, in very different ways, that contemporary global capitalism and its

operational logics do not constitute a rational and free “reality.”<sup>91</sup> Rather, each demonstrates capitalism poses threats to liberty, equality, and to the future of the species, no brand of practical management or technological invention can alleviate. Drawing upon newly available data sets, Piketty demonstrates capital, without policy intervention, produces structural inequalities, widening the gap between elites and everyone else. Klein marshals and synthesizes research from a number of fields to demonstrate how market logic produces the ecological crisis her book encourages us to recognize is unprecedented and dire. She also argues this logic animates an economy “at war” with “human life” and ensures those who feel most acutely the consequences of this conflict are those most “vulnerable” to the devastations it causes. Klein argues contemporary problems press us to change “how we live, how our economies function, even the stories we tell about our place on earth.” She calls readers to imagine and produce futures our current realities foreclose.

Klein’s journalism is more polemical than Piketty’s economics, but the observations both support suggest only radical economic and political change can meet the challenges democratic movements face in the present. Attempts to imagine changes of this kind might first correctly identify the nature of these challenges, and second, might recognize what sort of human activity might meet these dangers. The brand of neoliberal discourse of which Blair’s op-ed is typical does not accomplish these aims. It denies contemporary global capitalism produces inequality and threatens many vulnerable groups. It therefore does not encourage us to examine how we live, how our economies function, or how we imagine our relationship to reality. As Blair’s reasonable proposals show, this discourse often assumes the human stands in a fixed relationship to its world or “reality,” and the transformative activities it sanctions follow from this basic premise. Blair argues activities of management will best serve democracy. To “manage,”

however, is “to control (a person or animal); to exert one's authority or rule over.”<sup>92</sup> When elites privilege administrative procedures, they call for improved methods of control, rather than for creative, thoughtful, and democratic engagement. The notion that technology, the brand of creative activity some on the right do celebrate, can transform and improve life also presumes a stable relationship between the human innovator and the material he or she shapes. As twentieth-century philosophers have argued, activities the Greek root *techne* gathers assume all matter is available to humans for instrumental use.<sup>93</sup> This perspective, most recognizable today in the language of “innovation” Silicon Valley uses,<sup>94</sup> suggests we can meet with novel technologies any challenge to the life of the species, even challenges innovation produces.<sup>95</sup> Such conservative intellectuals as Fukuyama, who still defends the precocious “end of history” thesis that earned him so much attention in the wake of the Cold War, propose we administer and innovate because both activities follow from the view that the established order is adequate. At the end of history, these enterprises cede to elite interests and to the inhuman forces of the market that support them the fields of political and economic organization.

I want to suggest the Whitman of 1855 can help those invested in democratic projects develop an alternative sense of the activities the present requires. What I call Whitman’s erotic poetics—in other words, his view of creative activity and the love that animates it—supports the radical and transformative projects Klein, Piketty, and others advocate. This is not only because many readers on the left see Whitman as a progenitor for several urgent contemporary movements, among them efforts associated with environmentalism and LGBTQA rights.<sup>96</sup> More fundamentally, Whitman is an originary figure for a tradition of writing in the US that offers a different and radical view of the relationship of the human to its world and of the enterprises by which humans can transform it. This genealogy elaborates an historical and materialist view of

human life grounded in a range of creative pursuits Whitman calls in 1855 “poetry.” In the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman explores the nature, range of influence, and limitations of poetry, a brand of human activity he makes equivalent to other material forces. He suggests love (eros) animates the poetic, which is, for Whitman, as responsible for creating the worlds and the selves we know and experience as are the forces we today ascribe to biology and sexual reproduction. Whitman suggests poetry links to these other domains, and deserves attention from those who attempt to understand the nature of human life. I argue this vision of the poetic can help us reconceive the nature of the enterprises in which we engage as we work for equality and liberty.

In the next section, I return to some key passages from the 1855 preface and the first version of the poem Whitman would eventually call “Song of Myself.” These early pieces elaborate the radical view of life and of poetry that Whitman begins to revise, under pressure from critics, even in the second edition of *Leaves*. I spend time with a few of the moments in which Whitman explores the function of poetry and its relationship to what he calls “love.” In passages of this kind, Whitman’s language serves the present in at least two ways. First, Whitman insists there is no determinate relationship between the human and reality. His work thus suggests management and innovation are not adequate enterprises for radical change. Instead, he proposes the activity he calls “poetry.” Second, Whitman suggests love or *eros* is a material force that motivates the broad sense of the poetic he celebrates. His vision of creative human activity thus differs from, and can serve as an alternative to, the view those who sanction and support state violence endorse.

Before I turn to “Song of Myself,” I want to differentiate the materialist view of Whitman’s love I develop from two popular critical approaches to the same themes. The first



approach, largely out of favor now, interprets Whitman's erotic scenes as spiritual allegories. The second, which currently dominates Whitman studies, makes the opposite claim and contends his love is sexual. In the reading that follows, I build upon these common ways of treating the erotic in *Leaves of Grass*. First, however, I want to identify some of the ways these approaches might prevent us from privileging the radically historical and material view of human life I believe Whitman's erotic poetics offers.

Until recently, many critics treated Whitman's obscene and erotic moments as allegories for the transcendental unions of body and spirit or soul and nature. Harold Bloom's *Poetry and Repression*, for instance, serves as a late and representative instance of this critical genre. Bloom describes the famously hot fellatio scene from "Song of Myself" as an "embrace" between the poet's "self and his soul."<sup>97</sup> He argues Whitman makes in this moments an "opening swerve away from Emerson,"<sup>98</sup> substituting representations of desire for the representations of acts Emerson supposedly privileged. For Bloom, Whitman's love is ultimately autoerotic, Oedipal, and mystic. It joins "self" and "soul" to defeat a literary father in the special realm of the psyche or spirit in which Bloom locates all literary activity. This perspective does not recognize the materiality of love I argue in the next section is important in Whitman's early work. Instead, Bloom's hermeneutic move sanitizes and contains the raw, material power Whitman's most scandalous and exciting moments discharge. As a neutralizing strategy, it is familiar. Plato's dialogues and the Christian tradition after Paul depend upon the same maneuver as Bloom does. Plato insists erotic love at its best leads us beyond the vile, finite things of this earth and toward the transcendental ideals philosophers alone attempt to attain. In Paul's first letter to his disciples in Corinth, he insists we mediate and sublimate our earthly love for heavenly aims. Other traditions of Christian scripture also defuse the power of erotic verse forms by treating them as

symbolic parables. The inclusion in the Old Testament of the sensual, romantic “Song of Songs” is another example of this strategy. To interpret the sexiest scenes in “Song of Myself” as narratives of symbiosis between body and soul is also to claim Whitman’s bawdy energy for the transcendental fictions he detested in 1855.

The second approach readers most often make to Whitman’s eroticism sets itself against this older one, which is no longer popular. Instead of reading Whitman’s erotic moments as spiritual allegories, critics writing in the latter part of the twentieth century and today suggest we read most of them as literally sexual. Critics believe doing so makes Whitman available as a resource for urgent and ongoing projects for sexual liberty. A brief survey of recent scholarly articles in significant peer-reviewed journals indicates this approach is dominant in contemporary Whitman studies.<sup>99</sup>

A critic writing on the theme of “sexuality” in Blackwell’s recently published *Companion to Walt Whitman* summarizes this common view:

Whitman realized that he could not speak directly about the ‘truths’ of sex and sexuality in the late nineteenth century, so he used poetic language to celebrate first his own male body and its many erogenous zones, and then widened that celebration to include the bodies, the desires, and the sexualities of others. These ‘truths’ he could utter using the slant language of poetry.<sup>100</sup>

This view borrows from Michel Foucault an interest in history and discourse but does not attempt to account for the “repressive hypothesis” Foucault elaborates in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Rather, it drafts Whitman for a sexually progressive epistemological project critics say he advanced in his time by “using the slant language of poetry.” Critics encourage us to understand Whitman’s poetic language is no more than a convenient cover for his personal

and political aims. Whitman chooses to write poetry only because he cannot otherwise talk frankly about sex.

This approach to Whitman dismisses the radical vision of poetics, and of love, *Leaves of Grass* offers in 1855. Doing so might be a strategically disabling move for critics on the left. A look at the methods and assumptions upon which American critic Michael Moon relies in his 1991 monograph, *Disseminating Whitman*—a book that remains today most representative of this approach—indicates why. Moon argues Whitman composes and revises *Leaves of Grass* in order to make “large-scale revisions” to “his society’s constructions of bodiliness, and especially of sexuality” (2). In other words, Whitman tries to transform the ways people think about and experience sexuality. Moon claims Whitman accomplishes this by making in his “writing a complex series of negotiations among the highly charged realms in his society which he desires to bring into contact, and ultimately to render in some ways identical, with each other: the literary, the sexual-political, and the political” (2). Whitman “negotiates” culture in his writing and so pursues a valuable brand of political action Moon intimates has discernible effects in “his society.” Presumably, Moon’s work of criticism engages in a similarly valuable brand of political negotiation. His criticism aims to continue in the present the project he believes Whitman launched in the nineteenth-century.

“Historicist” narratives of this kind are popular in 2014, though other critics on the left have worried since the 1980s the language of “culture as negotiation” upon which progressive critics rely might not work against the inequities they want to challenge. Edward Said has argued cultural studies celebrates as “political” and powerful a mode of professional activity that has no apparent effect in any sphere outside of the rapidly obsolescing domain of the academic humanities and social sciences. Others have argued new historicist methods and identity politics

agendas are often complicit with attempts on the right to draw attention away from—or to make it difficult to think critically about—the state and market forces that shape life today and the elite interests that determine them.<sup>101</sup> Because critics who treat “culture” as the privileged arena of political action do not always address economic and literally political arenas, they cede this thinking to others. This tendency has seemed to some critics alarmingly similar to the tactics intellectuals on the right, who insist we can manage (or “negotiate”) our way out of democratic crises, invoke.<sup>102</sup>

To question the assumptions that ground new historicist methods and identity politics agendas is not to dismiss the pressing and vital desires for equality that often inspire contemporary critical discourse. In the sections that follow, I attempt to join Whitman’s erotic poetics to the struggle for liberty critics on the left advocate. I share with others the sense that this struggle continues to be urgent for marginalized or “subaltern” groups across the globe, as the selection of *New York Times* headlines I mention above indicates. I also do not mean to deny that Whitman’s poems are often quite literally about sex. Below, I argue the power Whitman assigns the “poetic” he derives from and makes equivalent to the sexual—he suggests we regard both as potent reproductive activities that overlap with and influence each other. I believe this view of Whitman’s erotic poetics can help us achieve these liberatory aims in ways that Moon’s discourses of sexuality and negotiation precludes. This is because Moon’s project does not recognize as a category of value the “poetic,” which for Whitman includes the “political.”

According to Moon, Whitman acts politically when he renders equivalent several “realms” of “society.” He “negotiates” these allegedly (but not actually) different realms, and so reveals the “literary,” the “sexual-political” and the “political” are in fact the same. As Moon’s argument unfolds, however, it is clear Moon wants to elevate two of these categories and

disparage the third. Moon celebrates the “sexual-political” and values the simply “political” most. The “literary,” on the other hand, is out of favor. Moon suggests we read *Leaves of Grass* as if its “‘literary’ qualities” were “subordinate to other, primary, essentially nonliterary considerations.”<sup>103</sup> Moon does not define “literary,” a word he uses often in the book and sometimes places in quotation marks. Ostensibly, the “‘literary’ qualities” to which Moon refers seem to be those that conventionally distinguish poetry from other language practices. Poets consider language a material, rather than a medium, and so they consider sound, rhythm, and music when they compose. Undoubtedly, these considerations were important to Whitman, whose “language experiment” rejected generic conventions and used words in strange and novel ways. As I demonstrate in the next section, Whitman did not regard these formal practices as “merely” literary. They seemed to him imbued with the same erotic power as sexual activity.

The sensuous qualities of language do not appear to be important to Moon, however. He is as suspicious of them as was Plato, and he insists that Whitman was suspicious of them, too. Although he does not cite specific texts, Moon argues that Whitman wanted to revise a “culture” that tended “to idealize a limited range of types of writing as ‘literary’ and thereby to separate them definitively from political and sexual-political discourses.”<sup>104</sup> It is true that Whitman often dismissed what he called the “literary,” but Moon does not provide evidence that Whitman’s sense of what this means is identical with his own implied sense. Whitman associates the literary with the neoclassical texts of the past. These do not necessarily imagine meter and rhythm participate in the material processes of evolution and emergence I argue Whitman believes they do..

As the passages from the preface I cite below indicate, Whitman dismisses the “literary” to celebrate the “poetic,” a category that includes the “political” and a number of other creative

human enterprises. Whitman describes the US as “the greatest poem” because politics is poetic in *Leaves*, not because poetics is political. The distinction is significant. It allows us to extend the radical, material view of love I suggest below Whitman offers us to the realm of political activity. Because Whitman imagines love is a material force that animates poetry, he suggests we regard politics as an erotic enterprise. *Eros* moves humans to make forms, and so to make the world. A purely sexual interpretation of Whitman’s poetics does not recognize this vision.

### **Walt Whitman’s Poetics of Love**

In his “Preface” to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman introduces the stunning and strange vision of poetic activity he develops in the rest of the book. He sharpens this vision against the different views of poetry he ascribes—tacitly—to his predecessors and contemporaries in Europe. As do other nineteenth-century “romantic” poets writing out of (and in the service of) a number of emergent national traditions, Whitman rejects the view of poetry we now associate with neoclassicism. He refuses to privilege metrical and generic conventions for their own sake or because these conventions help poets communicate moral lessons. “The greatest poet does not moralize,” Whitman writes, and “[w]ho troubles himself about his ornaments or fluency is lost.”<sup>105</sup> At the same time, Whitman rejects certain poetic practices he associates with “romance.” He rebukes the romantic who “creates unearthly beings or places or contingencies” because “fictions” of this kind cannot serve life on earth. Romance “demeans” us. It rests neither in “reality” nor in “the body,” Whitman’s figures for materiality, and so it cannot serve the “modern.” New ways of conceiving human life, Whitman argues, will eventually render the romantic obsolete. “As soon as histories are properly told,” he writes, “there is no more need of romances.” Whitman’s modern poet is different. He does not dispense ethical lessons in regular meter, nor does he invent consoling fantasies that encourage readers to escape

the realities of earthly life (death chief among these). Instead, he invents weird forms and tells cosmic histories. He sings of human life on earth, which, in the poems he eventually calls “Song of Myself” and “I Sing the Body Electric,” emerges out of deep time and primordial sludge with the power to shape itself and its world.

Whitman establishes the basic premises upon which his poetics rests in the first long sentence of his 1855 preface:

America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms [...] is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough that still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms...perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house...perceives that it waits a little while in the door...that it was fittest for its days...that its action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches...and that he shall be fittest for his days.

This opening at once introduces Whitman’s poetics and sounds the notes of celebratory nationalism Whitman repeats again at the conclusion to the preface. Before I open the former, which depends upon Whitman’s specific conception of the relationship between “forms” and “life,” I want to first distinguish the exceptionalist elements of the poetry that appear here from those that can support liberatory projects. A task of this kind requires a critical approach that does not reduce Whitman’s poetics to the nationalist overtones apparent even in 1855, as some late and post-Cold War critics do.

Without a doubt, the first lines of the preface participate in and renew a discourse of American exceptionalism already entrenched by the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>106</sup> Whitman figures the Old World as a corpse. Its dead body must be born away, however slowly, from the vigorous

and lively New World, the place where the basic metabolic processes of life (sleeping and eating) continue. For some critics, metaphors of this kind indicate Whitman's poetry is fundamentally complicit with the self-congratulatory narratives of American originality and individualism the state has long relied upon to explain and justify its imperial policies.<sup>107</sup> It is true that Whitman adopts an explicitly idealist, nationalist attitude in many of his writings after 1855, as later poems "Salut au Monde" and "Passage to India" and prose works *Democratic Vistas* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* demonstrate. It is also true that Whitman came to seem to twentieth-century critics a mythic resource in the early days of the Cold War, when the US state regarded art and culture as powerful weapons in its ideological struggle against communism. In R.W.B. Lewis' elegant 1955 study, *The American Adam*, for example, Lewis argues Whitman helps to create the myth of the "liberated, innocent, solitary, forward-thrusting personality" Lewis claims is "the new world's representative man" (28). For critics looking back at the work of Lewis and of F.O. Matthiessen after the Cold War, these elements of Whitman's poetry demanded, and still demand, severe critique. Nationalism continues to be a dangerous transcendental fantasy in the US,<sup>108</sup> and Whitman is undeniably an important figure for its history. *Leaves* invites readers to understand the poetic history it offers as "American," as if US life alone allows for new and freer relationships to reality.

I do not believe the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* is reducible to these exceptionalist elements, however. Before Cold War critics placed Whitman firmly within their national frameworks, many recognized in Whitman's sensuous, erotic language an utterly original conception of human life distinguished by its secular commitments to reality and imagination. D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, Jose Marti, Jorge Louis Borges, and many others recognized and drew upon this conception. As I bring out in this section the elements of Whitman's poetics I



want to privilege, I emphasize certain features of Whitman's democratic vision and leave others behind. Whitman's explicitly self-contradictory poetics makes it possible to value his loving commitment to creative imagination and to guard against his triumphalist, nationalist tendencies. Famously, his is not a totalizing poetics.

I return, then, to the first long sentence of the 1855 preface for a sense of this poetics and of the elements I suggest we value. Whitman introduces the words "life" and "forms" right away. These anchor the vision of poetry he elaborates throughout *Leaves*, and they describe a field of "action" that does not only include the formation of modern states. The first sentence—itsself a striking formal achievement—gathers under the broad rubric "forms" many categories of human pursuit and experience: "opinions and manners and literature," "politics," "castes," and "religions." These "forms" change over time, and why and how they do has everything to do with their reciprocal relationship to "life." Outmoded forms, created by time itself ("the past" is the agent in the first clause), remain in the world, even after "the life which served" the past's "requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms." Life can leave some forms and move into others. It is a kind of vital energy or principle. At the same time, what life passes into, when it leaves the forms of the past, is a "new life *of* new forms," as if "forms" create, give shape to, and, in a sense, *are* life. "Life" at once vitalizes forms and is "produced" by forms, so that both life and its forms change in (and because of) time.

We can thus take Whitman's corpse metaphor, and the language of "fit" heirs with which he develops it, literally. Human life depends upon material forms, but these change. Our forms include a range of objects and orders, among them biological bodies, styles of art and writing ("manners and literature"), and systems of political organization. In the paragraph that follows his opening, Whitman identifies these diverse forms, and those who make them, with poetry and

poets. “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature,” he writes. “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” Although we again see here an exceptionalist celebration of the nation that approaches the transcendental—“America” is not limited by time or space, a description that anticipates the reach of global American “culture” today—these statements also expand our sense of “poems.” Whitman celebrates the US because it is a democratic republic organized by revolution and constitution—in other words, by purposeful and considered human action. The US is a great poem because human activity created it. Poets are not only writers of verse, and poetry is not only made of words. “Poetry” names the diverse activities in which humans engage to create forms of life on earth, and a number of different poetic agents contribute to this work. As Whitman writes later in the preface, a “brotherhood of writers savans musicians inventors and artists” engages in poetic activity. Makers create the objects, institutions, and orders that constitute our worlds and ourselves.

As Whitman elaborates this capacious understanding of poetry, he sets it apart from several other human enterprises. He distinguishes his poetics from familiar conceptions of the literary (even as he maintains certain key classical, neoclassical, and romantic elements) and from philosophy and science. Whitman rejects the mimetic view of the poetic that has its roots in Aristotle. “[F]olks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects,” Whitman writes. “[T]hey expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls.” Although Whitman is a “poet of reality,” as he says in “Song of Myself,” he indicates here he believes poets committed to the real neither represent it nor gather “facts” and knowledge about it, as scientists do. He shares with such other romantics as Samuel Taylor Coleridge the view that poetry is creative. Thus, although Whitman rejects “romance” as a

narrative form able to serve earthly life, he shares with the genealogy of romance and “imagination” Coleridge advances the sense that poets transform the ways we perceive and experience the real, and so transform “reality” itself. Thus, “facts,” which scientists produce, aid him in his work, but his work is productive rather than epistemological. Poets “indicate a path” between reality and the human, and this path, Whitman’s historical view of forms suggests, changes over time.

Over the course of *Leaves*, Whitman further distinguishes what he calls poetry in two significant and related ways. First, he sources poetry’s transformative and creative power to work upon and take part in “reality” in the sensuous properties of language. Second, he believes love motivates poets to create their sensuous forms. Both of these elements emerge out of and modify long and overlapping genealogies of thinking about poetry. Whitman is an originary figure in these traditions, however, because he conceives both form and the love that motivates its production in terms more materialist than does any previous poet or thinker. For this reason, he is an important resource and progenitor for contemporary secular and materialist approaches to the human. He suggests “love,” and so too the poetic activities it animates, is a material force, produced by the evolutionary, geological, and cosmic processes he figures in his poems.

For Whitman, as for Plato, Coleridge, and others, a poet transforms life by way of his or her materials. Poets make forms out of matter. They are thus attentive above all to language’s sounds, harmonies, and rhythms. As philosophers since Plato have known and feared, poets thereby produce powerful effects. Language’s sensuous properties can rouse emotion, impart sensory pleasure, and shape minds. Although Whitman rejects Aristotelian views of poetry and Platonic views of truth, he shares with both philosophers a sense that poetry’s power is sensible.

In fact, Whitman imbues language's sensuous properties with more power than ever, as this remarkable passage from the preface demonstrates:

The poetic quality is not marshaled in rhyme or uniformity or abstract addresses to things nor in melancholy complaints or good precepts, but is the life of these and much else and is in the soul. The profit of rhyme is that it drops seeds of a sweeter and more luxuriant rhyme, and of uniformity that it conveys itself into its own roots in the ground out of sight. The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form.

Regular rhyme schemes and metrical arrangements do not make a form poetic or alive. Rather, the "poetic quality" enlivens a form, as it does "much else." Here again, forms and "life" constitute each other, as they do in Whitman's opening. The rhymes poets compose are powerful, not simply because their sounds please us, but rather because the pleasures their sounds bestow engender another kind of rhyme, "sweeter and more luxuriant." What is this second kind of rhyme, and what makes it sweeter and richer than the sonic rhyme that begets it? The motif of organic growth Whitman extends throughout this passage gives a sense. "Rhyme" indicates a felt sense of order. This felt sense emerges, for Whitman, from sound, so poetry's sensuous properties "seed" or produce the broad experiences of order we sense.

Whitman uses the metaphorical language of fruit and flower to describe the process by which material forms create a sense of ordered life ("rhyme") in the world. He thereby renders poetry's sound, meter, and rhythm equivalent to other biological or material modes of production. The sensuous features of poems produce shape and order, and this order unfolds as

blooms and fruits do from bushes. The botanical trope allows Whitman to show poetry is a process both of regularity and of unexpected or uncontrollable variation and difference. Poetic creation is thus a process of material emergence equivalent to others.

The extended motif of “fruition”—a kind of reproduction—also introduces the fundamentally erotic element of Whitman’s poetics. A poet’s sensuous forms, Whitman writes, are the “fruition of his love.”<sup>109</sup> In Whitman’s cosmos, love is a force that produces both poems and the other types of emergence with which Whitman groups them. The poet’s love, more than anything else, inspires him to create paths between humans and reality:

The known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet. He consumes an eternal passion and is indifferent which chance happens and which possible contingency of fortune or misfortune and persuades daily and hourly his delicious pay. What balks or breaks others is fuel for his burning progress to contact and amorous joy. Other proportions of the reception of pleasure dwindle to nothing to his proportions. [...] His experience and the showers and thrills are not for nothing. [...] The sea is not surer of the shore or the shore of the sea than he is of the fruition of his love and of all perfection and beauty.

Whitman at once describes and performs his erotic poetics in this passage. Love for “the known universe,” or cosmos, inspires the poet. His love is not metaphysical or divine, as love at its best must be for a genealogy with roots in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. Whitman’s poet loves a phenomenal sphere available to human investigation and experience, precisely that which Plato and St. Paul render abject. The universe rewards this earthly passion, which no set of events or individual “misfortunes” can check, with “delicious pay.” The poet enjoys an exceptional

capacity to experience pleasure in all earthly things, painful, destructive, and mortal as they may be.

The sonic intensities of this passage invite readers to experience the same opulent, erotic pleasures the poet enjoys. A complex pattern of alliteration alternates the hard consonants of destruction (“balks or breaks”) with the sibilant sounds of easy music (“the sea is not surer of the shore or the shore of the sea” than is the poet of his forms). Whitman performs similar moments of threatening and ecstatic passion throughout “Song of Myself.” At the heart of the poem, he narrates intense, devastating encounters with sensible forms and bodies (a soprano’s voice, that “villain touch”).

Whitman’s favorite figure—polysyndeton, a staple of his accumulative style—also contributes to rhythm and measure here. He lists and links one love object after another (“experience and the showers and thrills”), inviting readers to perceive as related and valuable a range of objects, others, and sensations. This logic of accumulation shapes most of the poems in *Leaves*. In “Song of Myself,” for example, Whitman assembles the legion of “lovers” he says “crowd” his “lips” and come “thick in the pores of [his] skin.” The poet’s lovers and love objects include the earth, the sea, the air, men, women, and children, the old and the young, prostitutes and wives, the mad and the dying. He also loves music, voice, color, and shape. As much as Whitman’s long lists name and so unite into one invented nation the diverse lands and peoples of the US, they assemble the wildly diverse earthly beings for which Whitman feels deep love. Whitman’s accumulative poetry allows him to accommodate and recognize as worthy of passion the many beloved entities and beings humans encounter on earth.<sup>110</sup>

Whitman accumulates these entities quickly at times, but he also loafs and spends time with some of them, so that rhythms of sensual rest alternate with rapid, fevered movement. As

“Song of Myself” builds to the climactic moment when Whitman names himself, for instance, he addresses the earth and sea as his lovers:

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night;

I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close barebosomed night! Press close magnetic nourishing night!

Night of south winds! Night of the large few stars!

Still nodding night! Mad naked summer night!

Smile O voluptuous coolbreathed earth!

Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!

Earth of departed sunset! Earth of the mountains misty-topt!

Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!

Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!

Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!

Far-swooping elbowed earth! Rich apple-blossomed earth!

Smile, for your lover comes!

Prodigal! you have given me love! .... therefore I to you give love!

O unspeakable passionate love!

Thruster holding me tight and that I hold tight!

We hurt each other as the bridegroom and the bride hurt each other.

In this apostrophe to earth, sea, and night, Whitman lingers over the sensuous features of the night scene that surrounds him. All the poet sees—trees, mountains, river, clouds—belongs to his lover, and he cries out as if to describe these things is in itself a pleasure. Whitman sketches the scene with a wet impressionism that heightens its amatory cast. He amplifies colors, shapes, movements, and refractions of light: moonlight is a “vitreous pour;” “shine and dark” mottle moving waters; even the trees are “liquid.” The poet transforms a night walk into an intensely erotic experience he shares with the earth, itself an erotic agent. He bids “barebosomed night” to press close and “voluptuous earth” to smile, addressing both as subjects capable of love. The earth has “given [him] love,” and the poet wants to reciprocate. The past tense Whitman chooses opens a wide range of possibilities for when and how the earth has given him love. One way to read these lines is to understand the night walk, the singular and sensory details of which Whitman has just described, as the love given. The poet’s apostrophe then takes place in the present of the poem and serves as the love he gives back. Although he calls the love he shares with earth and night “unspeakable,” the poet’s speaks about it in rich language. This speech is itself a form of love “given” back to the earth. The rhythm of Whitman’s rapidly accumulating exclamatory lines thrust to crescendo as he begs the earth to thrust, and the scene ends in a moment of hot and tender pain that gives way in the next section to another rendezvous, this time with the sea.

When Whitman addresses earth and sea as lovers of the human—“Thruster holding me tight” and “sea of breathing broad and convulsive breaths!”—he extends erotic agency and experience beyond the human. These moments do not merely personify the earth and sea and so explain the radically other in human terms. They render what Whitman calls in the preface “geography and natural life” erotic in nature. Because humans share with other material entities



and elements erotic agency, encounters between the human and the sea or earth can be erotic. Merely to *be* in water or air, to look about and describe what one sees—in Whitman’s reality, this is to give and receive love. For Whitman, “love” describes existence and encounter in a physical world. It is not an emotion, an affect, or an instinct. Instead, Whitman looses *eros* in the poem from both the realm of emotion and from the realm of sexual reproduction and renders it a powerful material force. He also renders poetic speech, such as he performs it here, a significant part of this broader erotic category. The earth extends to the poet love through its rivers, trees, and mountains, and thus through life’s elemental substances and processes; the poet offers the earth love through his language. The exchange Whitman stages between earth and poet suggests these two erotic activities are equivalent.

As “Song of Myself” moves toward its conclusion, Whitman invites us to understand this expanded sense of *eros* in the context of deep time and evolutionary development. He condenses a cosmic narrative of human emergence. The “poet of reality” offers what the “Preface” promises—a possible history of life “properly told”:

Immense have been the preparations for me,  
Faithful and friendly the arms that have helped me.

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen;  
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,  
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,  
My embryo has never been torpid....nothing could overlay it;

For the nebula cohered to an orb....the long slow strata piled to rest it on...vast  
vegetables gave it sustenance,  
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it with care.

All forces have been steadily employed to complete and delight me,  
Now I stand on this spot with my soul.

Whitman's fable is not messianic or self-congratulatory, and it is not transcendental. Whatever "I" the passage celebrates belongs to any human, as Whitman indicates when he writes of the slave in "I Sing the Body Electric": "For him the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant." This passage encourages us to understand the human is something that has emerged from a long and cosmic history of matter. Whitman's narrative of this history of material emergence imbues stars, cycles, and vegetables with agency. Physical "influences" and "forces" prepare the human. Dinosaurs, vegetables, and "long slow strata" participate in its development. In contrast to fables of divine creation, these agents work slowly. They do not call something into being out of nothing. They pile sediment or offer sustenance and transport. Whitman's interstellar narrative traces gradual movements. The story of the human now includes the eventual coherence of diffuse gas and dust ("the nebula") into more stable forms of organization ("an orb"). Whitman describes the agents that take up these "immense" preparations as he described poets in the preface: "All forces have been steadily employed to complete and delight me." The line extends the poet's function—to make forms out of love—to the range of physical, biological, and evolutionary processes he narrates.

Out of this poetic history, Whitman's "I" comes to "stand on this spot with my soul." The "soul" Whitman invokes here cannot be identical with the soul the Christian tradition celebrates.

The Christian soul is divinely created and eternal. Its origin and end are determinate. Here, by contrast, organic developments produce the soul over “quintillions of years.” Although Whitman extends the existence of the “I” beyond the usual constraints of a single mortal life—“generations guided” him before he “was born”—he does not suggest the “I” existed, or can exist, in a single, essential form. Rather, the “I” has been dispersed among the stars—a nebula, an orb, and finally, an embryo. This sequence connects the reproductive processes that produce life on earth to a broader cosmology that includes planetary movements. It does not then offer a vision of spiritual longevity, but rather a longevity of material dispersion. This vision has more in common with the laws of thermodynamics than it does with Christian theology.

The human emerges from out of immense and unfathomable temporalities to “stand on this spot with” its “soul.” In his “Preface,” Whitman uses the word “soul” to describe that element of the human between “reality” and which the poet, in his or her capacity as “complete lover” of the universe, “indicates a path.” The 1855 *Leaves of Grass* suggests material processes have fabricated a being capable of producing, out of loving, poetic creation, a variety of paths between itself and its world. The book also suggests, against Enlightenment discourses that privilege human reason, this capacity is worthy of attention and value. In modernity, Whitman encourages us to recognize our erotic poetic capabilities are neither an accident nor an ornament.

### **Whitman’s Love and Our Future(s)**

I believe the erotic poetic view of human life Whitman offers speaks to ongoing democratic projects and to the challenges these face today in at least two ways. First, the erotic language he uses to describe how humans can produce futures is very different from the language of righteous violence popular in the US (and elsewhere) today. In the US, the state develops and disseminates this discourse. The Senate’s “Torture Report” has recently made the

internal language the Bush administration used to justify its “enhanced interrogation” techniques available to the public. The report indicates the institutions and individuals Mike Lofgren calls the “deep state” aimed after September 11, 2001 to engender a future free of “threats” to the US by destroying the futures of those the state labeled “terrorists.”<sup>111</sup> After September 17, 2001, when President George W. Bush granted the CIA what Diane Feinstein’s Senate committee calls “unprecedented counterterrorism authorities,” the state could “covertly capture and detain individuals ‘posing a continuing, serious threat of violence or death to U.S. persons and interests or planning terrorist activities.’”<sup>112</sup> To create such a threat-free future, Feinstein’s report shows the state institutionalized and routinized protocols that compromised the futures of individuals held in facilities ungoverned by international law.<sup>113</sup> A search for the word “future” in the report shows this relationship. The documents Feinstein’s committee makes available, and the language the committee uses, deploys “future” in three primary ways. The report describes “future attacks,” “future interrogation” practices, and the admittedly endangered “future” of detainees who survive incarceration and torture. The relationship the state’s discourse establishes between three categories indicates the Bush administration wanted to prevent harm to state interests by assuring violent CIA practices could continue, despite the irrevocable damage to individual lives these procedures were known to cause.

Although the Obama administration has attempted to distinguish itself from the previous administration and the practices it sanctioned at detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Obama has long defended what journalists call his “drone war.” Since he took office, Obama has overseen the escalating use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in the Middle East and at home.<sup>114</sup> In 2013, he offered a systematic defense of this military strategy that rehearsed the same explanatory narrative for US violence Bush established after the attacks on the World Trade

Center. After “a group of terrorists came to kill as many civilians as they could,” Obama explained, “our nation went to war,” so we must continue to take “lethal, targeted action against al Qaeda and its associated forces, including with remotely piloted aircraft commonly referred to as drones.”<sup>115</sup> While privileged technologies and techniques change, this narrative—itsself a poetic invention—continues to shape the present.

Some intellectuals on the left believe contemporary discourses of violence such as these, which are not particular to the US,<sup>116</sup> pose a danger to “the very possibility of politics,” as Etienne Balibar put it more than a decade ago.<sup>117</sup> In the twenty-first century, Balibar argues, the “systematic use of various forms of extreme violence and mass insecurity [...] prevent[s] collective movements of emancipation that aim at transforming the structures of domination.”<sup>118</sup> Balibar joins these forms of violence to the forms of contingency free markets seem to produce. The Global War on Terror, Bush’s memorandum demonstrates, protects not only American lives, but also American “interests.”<sup>119</sup> These contemporary conditions are related.

Whitman’s encourages us to recognize humans do not stand in fixed relation to the “realities” we perceive and experience. This insight, which Whitman shares with many other moderns (Marx and Nietzsche, for instance), differs from the view many in the US and across the world, elite or not, endorse today. Conservative discourses have long insisted that “there is no real alternative” to market economies, as Margaret Thatcher wrote in 1980.<sup>120</sup> This way of thinking has become over the past thirty years pervasive, and intellectuals on the left often repeat the observation Fredric Jameson made in 1994: “It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism.”<sup>121</sup> Contemporary discourses on the right offer new versions of Thatcher’s claim. Blair argues market economies best serve democratic interests because they are “real” and democratic

governments are, apparently, not. Fukuyama, who challenges Piketty's claim that high returns on capital produce inequality, argues democracies flounder today because of "the natural human tendency to reward family and friends," an allegedly essential human characteristic he argues "operates in all political systems," regardless of time and place. These positions assume humans, and the world humans experience, remain the same across time and place, and so they often discourage attempts to imagine and work for radical change.

To appeal to "poetry" and "love" in this context might sound sentimental, but in Whitman's work, these words name broader material and political categories that allow him to conceive of human life in terms radically different than do the forces Balibar and others describe. Whitman offers an alternative way to imagine the activities by which we shape the future. Fundamental to this view of poetics is the sense that the "paths" humans create between our world and ourselves originate in a place of supreme indeterminacy. Before we can manage or innovate, we must establish a relationship between the "dumb real objects" and ourselves that seem to us beautiful, useful, or something else. Implicit in this view is the understanding that this relationship can never be finally decided. It is always being revised. Conditions of contemporary ecological disaster, growing economic privation, and decreasing opportunities for democratic self-governance suggest a transformation of this kind might serve us today. If we recognize, as Whitman does, that the species shapes itself and its world out of radical instability, we might begin to imagine both an end to the contemporary conditions that organize life and a beginning for alternate forms. Whitman's vision of the power of the poetic might therefore open onto a set of responses to our current challenges that differs from those the right prescribes.

Whitman also privileges "love" as a means to create. This does not mean he does not believe humans do not and cannot create out of anger, fear, or hatred. These other capabilities

can be productive as well as destructive. For Whitman, however, the capacity to create out of love enables the species to accomplish some of its most celebrated poetic feats. Loving creation allows us to gather as democratic members of a larger group, to protect those who are marginalized, and to invent systems that strive to produce equality on earth. In other words, our poetic capacities, grounded in love, allow us to create many of the political, cultural, and economic forms we value. Whitman does not believe this is an accident of history. It seems to him a species capacity produced by material processes over a long period. Love, he writes, is the “kelson of creation.” The metaphor, from “Song of Myself,” compares “creation” to a vessel and “love” to the primary structural feature upon which that vessel is assembled. The trope renders love a structural component of created forms, and Whitman’s erotic poetics invites us to recognize its value.

### 3.0 HERMAN MELVILLE'S EROTICS OF READING

In this chapter, I read two texts Melville composed in the 1850s. I put his well-known review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories, "Hawthorne and his Mosses," in conversation with his strange novel, *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*. I argue these works together describe and enact a mode of literary or poetic practice I call an "erotics of reading." This mode draws explicit attention to the material conditions that make literary activity possible. These conditions, Melville suggests in *Pierre* and "Hawthorne and His Mosses," emerge from the loving encounters literary activity makes possible between readers and writers. Such encounters do not inform, entertain, or offer moral guidance. Instead, Melville suggests the form of literary activity he privileges can emerge from and inspire feelings of love for worldly things. It also encourages readers to question the relationship between experience and knowledge conventional texts and other modes of intellectual activity endorse. Melville describes this sense of the literary in "Hawthorne and his Mosses" and enacts it through the unconventional narrative form he invents in *Pierre*.

I claim Melville opposes this view of erotic literary activity to the other philosophical, technological, and poetic practices he believes shape life in his moment. In *Pierre*, Melville identifies and indicts two popular modes of imagining intellectual activity in antebellum America. The novel opposes both the transcendentalism of such intellectuals as Emerson and the "Young American" organizers of commercial, social, and political life Melville parodies.



Although these modes often present themselves as antagonists, Melville suggests they have in common a similar view of the relationship between knowledge and experience. *Pierre* distinguishes these views from Melville's own and implicates both in the violent outcomes the novel argues can follow when writers try to convert human experience into transcendental truth or useful information. Melville challenges contemporaries who view the figure best suited to shape American life as a purveyor of timeless truth or a manager of malleable populations.

I believe it is important to return to Melville because he is deeply concerned in the 1850s with questions of democracy we continue to ask today. In "Hawthorne and his Mosses," Melville celebrates US democracy as a leading historical force in the world. He does not share with his "Young American" contemporaries the view that the US is essentially and eternally democratic. He does, however, believe American democracy might inspire other emancipatory projects. In *Pierre*, which Melville publishes two years later (1852), he explores some of the ways of thinking he believes threaten democratic ambitions in the US. Pierre Glendenning, Melville's protagonist, is an American aristocrat whose world collapses when he learns he has an illegitimate sister, Isabel. Melville explores the range of values, policies, and beliefs that disenfranchise Isabel, and suggests figures such as she (an impoverished orphan, a bastard, a woman, a foreigner) present to American democracy a special series of challenges.

Because Melville's works challenge transcendentalists, on the one hand, and technocrats, on the other, he especially speaks to two challenges still active in our present. First, Melville questions the economic policies he believes reproduce in America Europe's inequalities and contests the celebrations of technological innovation he believes justify exploitative labor practices. Second, he rejects the exceptionalist discourses that view America as essentially democratic and so superior to all other nations. As I demonstrate in the introduction to the

dissertation and in the previous chapter on Walt Whitman, these ways of thinking still shape contemporary life. The 2015 State of the Union address, in which President Obama invites us to invent new futures, supports this claim. In his address, Obama claims for the US “the right to act unilaterally, as we have done relentlessly since I took office, to take out terrorists who pose a direct threat to us and our allies.” At the same time, he affirms the US “lead[s]—always—with the example of our values. That’s what makes us exceptional. That’s what keeps us strong. That’s why we have to keep striving to hold ourselves to the highest of standards—our own.” Obama shares with previous administrations, and with the “Young Americans” Melville satirizes in *Pierre*, the sense that no US state action, no matter how violent, can disrupt America’s essential commitment to equality, democracy, and freedom. Melville proves this way of thinking has a long history. He also offers resources by which we might continue to counter it. These include the historical views of human life Melville believes certain modes of literary activity support.

Obama also identifies economic production and manufacturing as vital to the future he envisions. “We need the new economy to keep churning out high-wage jobs for our workers to fill,” he claims. “Our manufacturers have added almost 800,000 new jobs. Some of our bedrock sectors, like our auto industry, are booming. But there are also millions of Americans who work in jobs that didn’t even exist 10 or 20 years ago—jobs at companies like Google, and eBay, and Tesla.” Such claims as these, I demonstrate below, were also popular in Melville’s moment, and *Pierre* shows he found them suspicious, or at least deserving of reflection. Although Melville knew from experience how important were questions of employment and income, he suggests in *Pierre* this brand of economic activity might not simply produce financial opportunities for those it employs. As it satirizes the politician and mogul Zadock Pratt, the novel suggests discourses

that celebrate production and technological innovation without reflecting upon the larger economic systems to which they contribute might reproduce harmful, aristocratic class structures and limit freedom. Melville shows how the brand of loving attention he associates with literary writing might encourage us to challenge some of the entrenched ways of thinking that continue to impede emancipatory ambitions today.

### **Performing Love in “Hawthorne and his Mosses”**

In “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” Melville narrates a reader’s first encounter with a mode of writing that does not aim to entertain, inform, or moralize.<sup>122</sup> A few years later, in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville calls this mode “romance,” as Hawthorne does in “The Custom-House.”<sup>123</sup> In his review of the stories Hawthorne collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Melville meditates upon a mode of literary activity he describes using a language of “love.” I believe Melville first articulates in this review the erotic, secular, and historical view of the literary he later pursues in *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and *The Confidence-Man*. In contrast to the plainly transcendental poetics of such mid- to late- nineteenth-century contemporaries as Emerson, Melville invokes a sensuous language of love and passion that grounds literary activity in time and space and orients it toward the immanent possibilities of shared human enterprise. The review establishes a loving relationship between the American writer and the reading public, and between the writer and the world to which his works respond.

“Hawthorne and His Mosses” treats literary writing as a category of emergent activity US culture does not yet recognize.<sup>124</sup> Above all, Melville believes US writers suffer because they have no audience. The few American critics interested in literary writing “are asleep,” and “Englishmen” offer US writers “more just and discriminating praise” than do “their own

countrymen.”<sup>125</sup> Given these conditions, Melville imagines and narrates a fictional relationship between a reader and a writer he believes could inspire both parties.

Melville uses charged erotic language to describe this relationship. “Mosses” is “erotic” in two ways. First, Melville celebrates Hawthorne as a lover of worldly, rather than divine things, and he connects this erotic love to the writer’s function as a teller of truths. Hawthorne, Melville writes, seems to love more deeply than can others, and this is what renders him suitable for his work as writer. His fictions “can not proceed from any common heart;” they reflect a depth of emotional “suffering” which alone “can enable any man to depict it in others.”<sup>126</sup> In the writer of literature, “[h]umor and love, like mountain peaks, soar to...a rapt height,” while “a great, deep, intellect...drops down into the universe like a plummet.”<sup>127</sup> This capacity to love, matched by the writer’s mind, undergirds and makes possible the version of truth Melville identifies with literature’s capabilities.

The writers the Virginian admires (Hawthorne and Shakespeare) are “masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches.”<sup>128</sup> Here, “telling” produces “Truth,” so truth emerges from language. “Truth” is a furtive presence just as easily concealed again.<sup>129</sup> Melville suggests this capacity for telling the difficult truths of the mind, heart, and world, which Shakespeare exemplifies, is rooted in the “blackness”<sup>130</sup> also palpable in Hawthorne’s stories. Against the background of this blackness, the “sane madness of vital truth,”<sup>131</sup> literature, distinct from other forms of utterance, produces stands out. The writer who produces those elusory, unstable “truths”—fleet as “a scared white doe in the woodlands”—touches audiences, as simply entertaining or informative texts cannot.<sup>132</sup> These truth capabilities are “the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare”: “those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth,” “those quick, short probings at the very axis of reality.”<sup>133</sup> Works composed

with a profound and abiding love for others, for difficulty, and for the tandem pains and pleasures of a human life, link experience to language differently than do works that claim to arrive at and impart essential truths.

Melville's vision of literary activity is also "erotic" because the metaphors Melville uses to describe the relationship between Hawthorne and the Virginian are intimate and almost sexual. As de Man observes of Schlegel's *Lucinde*, Melville's language could as easily describe sex as it does the act of writing or reading literature. There are "quick, short probings;" "grateful impulses;" the writer in "full flower;" "love and admiration" that can only be "relieved by utterance;" the "hay mow" "charged with love;" the writer who "expands and deepens down" into the reader. Melville uses a language of motion and movement to describe the writer's relationship to "reality" and "truth." The truths such writers as Hawthorne compose out of love flash forth only occasionally as writers probe reality with a series of quick, short thrusts. The Virginian uses erotic language of this kind throughout the review. He devotes enthusiastic and affectionate attention to Hawthorne's work and describes his reading experience in intimate, amorous language. After two sessions in the "hay mow" with *Mosses from an Old Manse*—two literal 'rolls in the hay'—the narrator is "charged more and more with love and admiration of Hawthorne."<sup>134</sup> This love, the review suggests, is transformative.

In the essay's most erotic passage, Melville's narrator describes a sensual interplay between work and self that promises, over time, to change the reader. After repeated encounters with the text, he or she becomes capable of feeling previously unknown passions and loves, which intensify as familiarity with the work brings the reader to emotional heights and depths:

To what infinite height of loving wonder and admiration I may yet be borne, when by repeatedly banqueting on these Mosses, I shall have thoroughly incorporated their whole

stuff into my being,—that, I can not tell. But already I feel this Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul. He expands and deepens down, the more I contemplate him; and further, and further, shoots his strong New-England roots into the hot soil of my Southern Soul.<sup>135</sup> (1167).

The passage compares the act of reading to organic processes of reproduction and growth. Hawthorne, the Virginian says, “shoots his strong New-England roots into the hot soil of my Southern soul”<sup>136</sup> and drops “germinous seeds” there.<sup>137</sup> Hawthorne’s “roots” penetrate the narrator’s “soil” of the narrator’s “soul” and something grows there. The motif of planting and generation, which Whitman also develops, renders reading a transformative, reproductive act. The language of heat, strength, and penetration renders the scene of reading a scene of intimacy. Reading gathers together different minds and different places by generating love. Melville marks both the writer and reader by region—New England penetrates the South as the Virginian reads.

In “Hawthorne and his Mosses,” Melville thus stages what I call an “erotics of reading.” “Erotics,” according to the *OED*, names a “‘doctrine’ or ‘science’ of love.”<sup>138</sup> Melville does not develop a science, but he offers a vision of love he grounds in the activity of literary encounter, and he recommends it to others. The act of reading, Melville suggests, alters the one who performs it, primarily by increasing the reader’s capacity to appreciate, love, and wonder. The writer’s ability to tell the truth follows from his or her capacity to feel, and thus to create work that shows, as Hawthorne’s does, “such a depth of tenderness, such a boundless sympathy with all forms of being, such an omnipresent love” it “can not proceed from any common heart.” Loving engagement with the text over time promotes the same expansive capability in the reader. In this way, literary activity is productive, not only of texts, but of forms of life. It engenders modes of being and responding that would not otherwise emerge. Literary work is therefore not

mimetic, but rather creative. Melville compares reading and banqueting, and so renders reading an affective and bodily activity. When we read, as when we eat, we bring that which is not the self—here, language—inside. Language feeds us, becomes part of us, and ultimately, sustains us, as food does.

When Melville stages this erotic, literary relationship between readers and writers, he enacts a drama he believes has broader significance for human life. He therefore connects his claims about the literary to reflections on the writer's relationship to the nation and, more broadly, to an imagined community of humans. Melville's narrator begins to demonstrate how a shared culture of taste and feeling emerges from such a relationship, linking the Virginian's particular act of reading, firmly situated in its specific New England locale—he is “[s]tretched on that new mown clover, the hill-side breeze blowing over [him] through the wide barn door, and soothed by the hum of the bees in the meadows around”<sup>139</sup> (1155)—to the genesis of a broader, and not necessarily national, collectivity. The erotic link Melville establishes between reader and writer is, importantly, one between strangers. The intense allegiance of the narrated bond does not rise out of personal interest. “I never saw the man,” the narrator makes clear, “and in the chances of a quiet plantation life, remote from his haunts, perhaps never shall.”<sup>140</sup> The fact that the speaker is *not* Melville allows a fervent, yet impersonal (or immediately disinterested) relationship between the remote writer and the anonymous, unknown reader to emerge. Melville was inspired to read and then to write about Hawthorne after the two met, but his narrator, significantly, admires a stranger's words.

Melville's commitment to love between strangers suggests the function of the writer cannot be defined, for him, without simultaneously defining the function of the reading public.<sup>141</sup> The erotic relationship between the two is not one of authorial service to needy and

impressionable publics. It is collaborative and mutually beneficent. Language alters and inspires readers and shapes the tastes and identities of the collectives. The act of writing for others, and of being read by a responsive public, also alters the writer. Public conversations improve imaginative works and so allow publics to actively participate in the transformative power in which literary activity takes part. The review describes this erotic process. The Virginian exhorts his own readers to take up Hawthorne, that “excellent author, of your own flesh and blood”:

Give not over to future generations the glad duty of acknowledging [Hawthorne] for what he is. Take that joy to your self, in your own generation; and so shall he feel those grateful impulses in him, that may possibly prompt him to the full flower of some still greater achievement in your eyes. And by confessing him, you thereby confess others; you brace the whole brotherhood. For genius, all over the world, stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round.<sup>142</sup>

To feel pleasure as a reader is not simply to be gratified; the duty of public acknowledgment follows from this pleasure and brings its own joys. If American readers leave to Europe or to posterity the task most properly and presently theirs, they forsake pleasure; the joy one derives from loving another, from loving what that other makes, and from enjoying what grows from that reciprocal love and gratitude. The reader who recognizes and enjoys the writer’s abilities experiences the pleasures that attend such recognition, pleasures of contributing to further genesis. Following the reader’s public acknowledgment, the writer produces works even more pleasurable and loving. And when the reader feels and expresses pleasure, reciprocated by the increasingly responsive works the writer produces, the result moves beyond the confines of the national community of taste this productive and gratifying exchange creates. The pleasure of



literary activity generates increasingly global relays of emotion, pleasure, and production, running round the whole circle of a globe charged by varied and diverse articulations of “truth.”

While some of the language Melville uses in “Mosses” bears a resemblance to the explicitly exceptionalist discourses such contemporaries as Emerson produce, the nuanced vision of human life Melville develops is very different from other popular mid-nineteenth-century conceptions. Melville celebrates “those writers, who breathe that unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity in all things, which now takes the practical lead in this world, though at the same time led by ourselves—us Americans.”<sup>143</sup> Literary “superiority” should arise with “political supremacy,” and because the US as nation-state leads the world in the dominant democratic spirit of the age, so too should its writers lead. Melville emphasizes this democratic liberty after imploring US writers to create original forms that do not imitate the English or the French, an appeal he connects to political power in the review’s most ostensibly nationalist passage: “While we are rapidly preparing for that political supremacy among the nations, which prophetically awaits us at the close of the present century; in a literary point of view, we are deplorably unprepared for it.”<sup>144</sup> The passage goes on to revisit and encourage the praise of domestic texts, even if new native forms are ugly in comparison to Europe’s “smooth” and elegant literary traditions. As the *Virginian* puts it, “the time is not far off when circumstances may force” England to “play the flunkey” to American forms, an assertion that predicts the increased cultural and political dominance of American democracy will eventually come to influence the cultural practices of other nations.<sup>145</sup>

Melville celebrates the US and declares its cultural forms will soon shape life elsewhere. The language he uses to explain why he believes this is the case differs from the popular language of his moment, however. Melville does not use the language of destiny or of essential

superiority such Young American contemporaries as John O'Sullivan developed. For O'Sullivan, "manifest destiny" licensed war with Mexico and the annexation of Texas. Because the US was founded on principles of equality, O'Sullivan suggested its actions would always be democratic. O'Sullivan, who drew upon notions of manifest destiny to justify the Mexican-American War and the Annexation of Texas, believed the US was "destined to be the great nation of futurity" because "the principle upon which a nation is organized fixes its destiny, and that of equality is perfect, is universal. It presides in all the operations of the physical world, and it is also the conscious law of the soul—the self-evident dictates of morality, which accurately defines the duty of man to man, and consequently man's rights as man." For O'Sullivan, equality is a biological principle that governs both the physical world and a realm he associates with the "soul" or "spirit." Because its founders "organized" the US according to this "universal" concept, at work in all things, US activities must always serve democratic projects. Contemporary elites continue to think this way today, as I note above. The Obama and Bush administrations have both argued the ongoing "War on Terror," for instance, is a democratic project, rather than a project that destroys life and liberty for Americans and others. Melville, by contrast, believes America is a force to be celebrated because it spreads democracy. He does not describe the "democratic spirit" he applauds as an essential feature of an unchanging entity. America seems instead a historically leading force, a condition that might at any time change, because "America" is a limited geographic and historical invention.

Melville's vision of literary activity serves this historical and worldly vision of human life. It makes no overtures to the all-powerful and isolated individual, to the monumental romantic hero, or to a timeless and transcendental view of human history. Through the relation of public to text and to author the Virginian enacts, Melville imagines how communities of taste

and sensibility form, how individuals are shaped by shared discourses, and how feeling and emotion, in tandem with thought, produce forms of life. Not only does Melville understand the individual writer as just one actor among the many who construct the world at any given point in history, he also suggests we understand writers in the context of democratic multiplicity. As readers and writers extend to each other love, both remain active agents in the personal and collective transformations literary activity makes possible. This vision of the writer departs from the heroic one Carlyle offers in his monumental theory of history.<sup>146</sup> Melville's writer might as well be anonymous for all his individual identity matters in this collaborative process. For, while the particular capabilities of a figure like Hawthorne should be eulogized, as we have seen, this love affects the community who celebrates him as much as it does the writer.

The review contributes to popular antebellum discourses of originality, American literary form, and the political ascendancy of the US. And yet, important differences distinguish the means by which and the ends to which Melville enters this conversation, as well as the sense in which he employs many of these terms. In contrast to Emerson, Melville situates the concerns with national literature he shares with others in historical context. He understands literary activity to be part of a history humans make on earth and in time. Literature and its inescapable political entanglements follow from worldly relations and processes; they are not the result of transcendental machinations orchestrated by agencies (like "God" or the "soul") that exist outside of time and space. Melville's narrator explains his hopes for American writers of the future—Hawthorne in particular—in terms that emphasize the worldly:

I somehow cling to the strange fancy, that, in all men, hiddenly reside certain wondrous, occult properties—which by some happy but very rare accident (as bronze was discovered by the melting of iron and brass in the burning of Corinth) may chance to be

called forth here on earth; not entirely waiting for their better discovery in the more congenial, blessed atmosphere of heaven.<sup>147</sup>

Melville grounds his interests in material accidents and interrelations. He values the worldly events that seem magical in their fortuitous and unexpected productions. The accidents of history can bring forth or produce the great, wonderful, or astonishing. As in the case of the Corinth legend he cites, immanent properties of matter and their prospects for combination and genesis emerge from sometimes-violent historical events. Framing the writer's potential developments this way, Melville affirms the events and constraints of earth over heaven. It is the world that makes literary achievement possible through its good accidents, and it is *in* the world that such achievements have any significance.

Melville's review of Hawthorne develops and celebrates an erotics of reading he believes can best serve democratic projects in his moment. The year after Melville composed "Hawthorne and his Mosses," Melville published *Moby-Dick*, the novel critics in the twentieth century would come to consider his greatest achievement. *Moby-Dick*, inspired by the Shakespearean style Melville celebrated in 1850, itself performed the literary mode Melville described in his review of Hawthorne. It was a significant departure from his first novels, and some critics disparaged it. These reviews seemed to have a profound effect on Melville, as his next novel, *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* (1852), demonstrates. In *Pierre*, Melville simultaneously attempts to write a successful novel an American audience will buy and criticizes the ways of thinking that seem to him to prevent audiences from appreciating literary works that do not entertain or moralize. *Pierre* suggests the loving vision of literary writing he conceives in 1850 proves too difficult to achieve in the US.

In the next section, I read *Pierre* as an attempt to write with love for the world and as an exploration of the impediments Melville confronted in the US when he tried to practice the vision of literary activity he invented. Melville's narrator treats both his subject matter and his audience with love. I argue this loving orientation shapes the novel's strange and self-conscious form. At the same time, Melville satirizes and rails against other literary writers and US intellectuals. The novel attacks such transcendentalists as Ralph Waldo Emerson and such technocrats as the politician and leather mogul Zadock Pratt. Each of these figures represents a way of imagining and organizing human life Melville believes leads ultimately to violence, as the novel's spectacular conclusion dramatizes.

### **Pierre Against the World**

*Pierre*'s first critics felt the book refused to meet some of the basic expectations they believed readers brought to novels. Many found it at once inscrutable and pointless.<sup>148</sup> Reviewers believed Melville attempted in *Pierre* a radical and strange project different from those familiar literary texts pursued.<sup>149</sup> Contemporary reviews for *Pierre* indicate critics expected novels in the early nineteenth century to entertain, inform, or impart some kind of moral lesson. The reviews also suggest there was at the time an established view of how a writer might achieve these aims. Writers were expected to transform their own experiences into practical insights or work them up into permanent truths they shared with readers.<sup>150</sup> Melville, clearly, was up to something else. In *Pierre*, one critic wrote, he had "adventured in a new sphere of novel writing,"<sup>151</sup> and in so doing, he had "deviated from the legitimate line of the novelist."<sup>152</sup>

Melville seemed to critics to deviate from his task in two primary ways. First, *Pierre* did not share the special knowledge of life at sea readers expected to encounter in a book by Herman Melville. Critics associated Melville with nautical adventures, and had in the past found his

books delightful and informative. For the first time, Melville failed to even “incline his hoary crown”<sup>153</sup> toward the entertaining subjects he worked up in his early novels, *Typee*<sup>154</sup> and *Omoo*.<sup>155</sup> While readers sometimes doubted if these works were as true to life as Melville claimed they were, no one doubted or questioned the literary function Melville seemed to fulfill in them.<sup>156</sup> A writer who embellishes his experiences is still a writer who sets out to represent them for the pleasure of others. Even *Moby-Dick*, the formal experiments of which anticipate *Pierre*, at least took place on a whaling ship such as the one Melville had known.<sup>157</sup> *Pierre*, by contrast, unequivocally rejected the popular assumption that a writer’s function was to inform or entertain with data, facts, or images pleasingly rendered. Melville had abandoned “his native element, the ocean,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* declared derisively, and the result was confounding.<sup>158</sup>

Melville also frustrated those who expected novels to impart moral lessons. Melville’s estranged friend Evert Duyckinck explained the problem this way in a review from which many others borrowed:

Mr. Melville may have constructed his story upon some new theory of art to a knowledge of which we have not yet transcended; he evidently has not constructed it according to the established principles of the only theory accepted by us until assured of a better, of one more true and natural than truth and nature themselves, which are the germinal principles of all true art. [...] The object of the author, perhaps, has been, not to delineate life and character as they are or may possibly be, but as they are not and cannot be. We must receive the book, then, as an eccentricity of the imagination.<sup>159</sup>

According to Duyckinck, Melville’s novel rejects “truth” and “nature,” the “germinal principles” upon which Duyckinck believes art rests. This is so because Melville’s book does not attempt to

represent reality, or, if it does, it fails to produce a reliable likeness of things “as they are or might be.” It is therefore an “eccentricity of the imagination,” an attempt to achieve something Duyckinck believes foolish. If Melville is not representing life, he must be representing its opposite, things “as they are not and cannot be.” Because Melville does not pursue mimetic activity, Duyckinck argues he cannot hold out to readers a life lesson, the literary function Duyckinck values. Instead, Melville offers readers a “most immoral *moral*”: “the impracticability of virtue,” the notion that “virtue and religion are only for gods and not to be attempted by man.”<sup>160</sup> Melville’s imagination is strange, inscrutable, and monstrous because he does not attempt by way of it to transform experience or observation into a literary likeness from which readers might draw moral instruction.

Because *Pierre* offers no obvious lesson, reviewers struggled to determine Melville’s relationship to the metaphysical discourses he parodied and explored in the book. Some accused Melville, as Duyckinck did, of indulging in “transcendental” flights too obscure and esoteric for readers to comprehend.<sup>161</sup> “It may be,” the *Lady’s Book* speculated, “that the heretofore intelligible and popular author has merely assumed his present transcendental metamorphosis, in order that he may have range and scope enough to satirize the ridiculous pretensions of some of our modern literati.”<sup>162</sup> Others called the book’s “metaphysics” bewildering and “abominable.” *The Ambiguities* seemed to at once join and repudiate the transcendental discourses reviewers associated with Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others. Melville spoke the same language as these difficult writers, and yet, his novel did not pursue their aims. As a reviewer for the New York *Herald*, put it:

No book was ever such a compendium of Carlyle’s faults, with so few of his redeeming qualities, as this *Pierre*. We have the same German English—the same transcendental

flights of fancy—the same abrupt starts—the same incoherent ravings, and unearthly visions. The depth of thought—the unerring accuracy of eye—the inflexible honesty of purpose, are wanting, at least, nothing outwardly reveals their presence.<sup>163</sup>

Melville's style, according to this account, resembles Carlyle's, and he is concerned with similar themes. He does not, however, write with a "purpose" the more honest because it is inflexible, and he does not penetrate, as Carlyle apparently does, to the depths of thinking. Melville reproduced all the esoteric difficulties critics associated with idealism, but he did not finally formulate any of the absolute observations transcendental discourses usually offered.

What, then, does Melville accomplish in *Pierre*? I believe he distinguishes erotic literary activity from other modes of intellectual activity he suggests lead to violence. In contrast to those truth discourses reviewers claim the novel does not quite resemble, Melville's novel suggests there is in fact an impasse between knowledge, experience, and action. Loving literary activity, the novel demonstrates, does not try to overcome this impasse. Instead, it explores it.

This careful view of the relationship between language and imagination, on the one hand, and experience and reality, on the other, determines the novel's form. *Pierre* is a novel about a writer, and this allows Melville to meditate upon the act of writing as he himself engages in it. The relationship of Melville's narrator to Pierre, the protagonist and writer of novels, is especially important. Melville's narrator poses knowledge and experience in a radically different relation than does Pierre. Melville keeps at the forefront of the novel the material circumstances Pierre ignores when he imagines his work to be transcendent. The narrative form Melville invents exposes to readers the seams of its construction while denying readers a full and unhindered vision of its protagonist's interiority. In so doing, Melville draws attention to the conditions of possibility that enable literary production. He highlights, instead of concealing, the



worldly circumstances that link reader and writer when one produces and the other comes to a text. *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* thus performs a version of the erotic literary activity Melville first elaborates in “Hawthorne and His Mosses.”

In *The Ambiguities*, the relationship of the narrator or writer to his subject and the relationship of the narrator to his reader cannot be separated. Each determines the other, and the novel will not conceal the narrative moves that usually render these relations invisible or normative through assumptions about an author’s expertise and truth-producing function. Melville carefully distinguishes the thoughts of the writer or narrator—the voice that guides readers through the novel—from the thoughts and attitudes of his protagonist, Pierre: “the thoughts we here indite as Pierre’s,” he writes, “are to be very carefully discriminated from those we indite concerning him.”<sup>164</sup> This statement at once suggests the novel has made it difficult to do so and requires it be done. Significantly, the narrator presents and distinguishes from Pierre’s capabilities “thoughts” that imagine the totality of “Human Speculative Knowledge” as an “Empire,” a realm that can never be protected from “those barbarous hordes which Truth ever nourishes in the loins of her frozen, yet teeming North.” “The Empire of Human Knowledge,” Melville writes, “can never be lasting in any one dynasty, since Truth still gives new Emperors to the earth.”<sup>165</sup> The novel’s form emerges from what Melville understands about knowledge and Pierre cannot—that it is contested and changeable, historical and worldly. Given this insight, the narrative necessarily changes throughout, producing what one critic calls the narrator’s “wildly inconsistent” “attitude toward his subject matter.”<sup>166</sup>

Melville manufactures a changing relationship between his narrator and his protagonist, and he does so by foregrounding his narrator’s relation to the reader. Sometimes, the narrator makes fun of Pierre, joking with readers about his protagonist’s ignorance and naivety. He also

often corrects himself, as if he has been indulgent and must make amends. After he has been ironic, he assures us he is in “soberest earnest,” (no “irony, if hitherto any thing like that has been indulged in,” operates in the text, he says). He erases or takes back earlier remarks and apologizes for his long narrative monologues. “[B]lame me not,” he writes, “if I contribute my mite” to the “infinite nonsense in the world.”<sup>167</sup> Sometimes he is sympathetic to his protagonist, Pierre. At other times, he seems to hate him. Melville anticipates critics who say he exhibits an inconsistent attitude toward his material. “I write precisely as I please,” he tells readers.<sup>168</sup>

By refusing to take and maintain a single established view of his material, Melville represents the variable experience of being a feeling, thinking human observer. If the novel is mimetic, it represents human perception, not a perceived world. Readers come to know Melville’s strange narrator more than we come to know Pierre, because the narrator withholds from us important information at key moments. Sometimes, the narrator insists, “We know not Pierre Glendinning’s thoughts” as Pierre walks the hills or villages of Saddle Meadows. At the moment of climax that concludes Pierre’s chapters-long internal struggle over what to do for his half-sister, Isabel, Melville refuses to tell readers what Pierre decides. Melville’s narrator describes Pierre’s every agonized thought as he attempts to convert into knowledge and then action thoughts and emotions he does not understand. At the decisive moment, Pierre poses to himself a question he believes will help him resolve his dilemma: “Lucy or God?” Are his allegiances to his betrothed or to the divine? Right here, Melville “draw[s] a veil.” He refuses the reader an image, explication, or figure that can represent Pierre’s final translation of his encounters with Isabel into reliable facts from which appropriate actions can follow. “Pierre had thought that all the horizon of his dark fate was commanded by him; all his resolutions clearly defined and immovably decreed,” but the task proves impossible. His (worldly) love for Lucy

disturbs the process by which he would transform his love for Isabel to a course of action based in essential ideals. At this precise moment of translation and achievement, fraught by an erotic agony, the narrator recoils; this is the moment of the intellectual process that cannot be represented, or more likely, cannot be completed at all. “Some nameless struggles of the soul,” Melville writes, “can not be painted, and some woes will not be told. Let the ambiguous procession of events reveal their own ambiguousness.” This line infuriated critics, but it tells us what Melville is up to. Melville denies he can represent the internal psychological processes the novel form ostensibly seems to master,<sup>169</sup> and in so doing he also turns readers’ attention outward, to the “ambiguous procession of events,” the unrepresentable real, that he refuses to synthesize into a coherent moral lesson or permanent truth. The novel thus renders the internal processes by which a mind might struggle to make experience inform action, but it refuses to engage in the same moves it shows its own protagonist struggling to perform.<sup>170</sup>

I believe these stylistic choices have something to do with love. Literary writing differs from theory, philosophy, and science, because it is sensitive to those elements of human life we associate with “emotion.” Melville’s novel refuses to present an unfeeling, objective narrator who synthesizes truths for readers. Instead, he invents a voice that feels deeply. This feeling voice refuses to do violence to that which it represents by converting it into knowledge, which can only reduce its complexity. Other modes of activity cannot account for the particularly human relays of “unsystematizable” causality central to life. Melville writes:

In their precise tracings-out and subtle causations, the strongest and fieriest emotions of life defy all analytical insight. We see the cloud, and feel its bolt; but meteorology only idly essays a critical scrutiny as to how that cloud became charged, and how this bolt so stuns. The metaphysical writers confess, that the most impressive, sudden, and

overwhelming event, as well as the minutest, is but the product of an infinite series of infinitely involved and untraceable foregoing occurrences. Just so with every motion of the heart. Why this cheek kindles with a noble enthusiasm; why that lip curls with scorn; these are things not wholly imputable to the immediate apparent cause, which is only one link in the chain; but to a long line of dependencies whose further part is lost in the mid-regions of the impalpable air.<sup>171</sup>

Poets, then, who trade in emotion and gloom, cannot point a clear course for action, as an infuriated Pierre learns when he turns to Dante and Shakespeare for guidance. “Dante had made him fierce, and Hamlet had insinuated that there was none to strike. Dante had taught him that he had bitter cause of quarrel; Hamlet taunted him with faltering in the fight.”<sup>172</sup> Emotion destroys positivist notions of causality, and literature can explore this instability without violently reducing it to strict order. Melville’s writing, which resembles in its aims Shakespeare’s and Hawthorne’s, takes emotion and passion as its subject and as its motivation. It does not illuminate or brighten, but instead deepens and entangles. It does not produce knowledge.

The relationship of emotion, and most often of “love” and the erotic, to knowledge thus dominates *Pierre*. As Pierre tells his young fiancé Lucy in the first chapters, and Melville’s narrator later confirms, the kind of knowledge that proceeds from and produces love does not need to master that which it would transform. Love need not, as Lucy first claims, “know all”<sup>173</sup>:

For, whatever some lovers may sometimes say, love does not always abhor a secret, as nature is said to abhor a vacuum. Love is built upon secrets, as lovely Venice upon invisible and incorruptible piles in the sea. Love’s secrets, being mysteries, ever pertain to the transcendent and the infinite; and so they are as airy bridges, by which our further shadows pass over into the regions of the golden mists and exhalations; whence all

poetical, lovely thoughts are engendered, and drop into us, as though pearls should drop from rainbows.”<sup>174</sup>

In Melville’s works, this is as true for the couple joined by love as it is for the distant reader and writer joined by love. Melville’s literary practice is erotic because it does not try to open everything to the light; its truths flourish in the darkness of the secret. Transcendence, here, becomes only a fact of affective experience, not an intellectual or historical absolute. Poetry, troped here as love, emerges from that which cannot be grasped and transformed under the scrutiny of bright reason. In this passage, love is gentle, “lovely,” all pearls and rainbows; but as the rest of the book suggests, love’s secrets can also be terrible. In either case, the task of the literary writer is not to bare every facet of lived experience to a light that claims to sublimate it into deeds. It is to stage an encounter, between strangers, that demands both writer and reader consider the consequences and implications that follow such a process.

*Pierre* also sets the creative, loving literary activity its narrator performs against other ways of thinking that dominated American life in Melville’s present. At a moment dominated by various and loosely affiliated mid-century partisans, organizers, and industrialists who championed “Young American” principles of nationalism, manifest destiny, industrial development, and foreign intervention, Melville questioned both the conventional literature he associated with the logic of industry and those who usually claimed to oppose it.<sup>175</sup> To conceive of the literary writer as one who transforms experience into informative truths that can be consumed is to conceive of an intellectual complicit with the impoverished forms of life industry produced in the US. Motivated by a similarly simplistic attitude toward the relationship between experience and knowledge, the transcendentalist intellectual who claims he opposes industry and its technocrats cannot mount a practicable challenge to that which he wants to combat.

Melville's novel challenges transcendental and technocratic positions as he satirizes America's literary scene. As a young man, Pierre published a few little pieces, the titles of which indicate the nature and style of his work: "The Tropical Summer: a Sonnet," "The Weather: a Thought," and "Beauty: an Acrostic." And yet, despite his modest canon, admirers celebrate and solicit him.<sup>176</sup> Approving women hound him for autographs. Reviewers laud him. They say his character is beyond reproach, and the content of his writing is as virtuous. He is a "highly respected youth" and his poems demonstrate "vulgarity and vigor—two inseparable adjuncts—are equally removed from him."<sup>177</sup> He "translates the unruffled gentleman from the drawing-room to the general levee of letters."<sup>178</sup> Critics appreciate him because his writing is utterly innocent and conventional. Solicitors also attempt to sell him a range of services, all of which play upon his vanity. Tailors turned publishers Wonder & Wen want to print Pierre's small canon in a handsome collected edition. They offer him "one tenth of the profits (less discount)." Illustrator Peter Pence volunteers his services to "the illustrious Glendinning" if the writer can supply "cash down on delivery of each design." Transcendentalist Donald Dundonald invites Pierre to lecture on "Human Destiny," or some equally suitable topic of his choosing, before Zadockprattsville's "Urquhartian Club for the Immediate Extension of the Limits of all Knowledge, both Human and Divine."<sup>179</sup>

Melville invents these characters to parody both transcendental views of literary activity and the robust US culture industry that supports them. Publishers Wonder & Wen borrow and parody Carlyle's primary trope from *Sartor Resartus*, itself a satirical text.<sup>180</sup> Carlyle's book, which helped bring German idealism to an Anglophone audience, employs the trope of the tailor to figure the relationship of the inferior material world to the divine spirit that drives a Hegelian progressive history. *Pierre* makes the relationship between tailoring and truth ridiculous by

turning the metaphor to commerce. “Your pantaloons—productions, we mean—“ Wonder & Wen write to Pierre:

have never yet been collected. They should be published in the Library form. The tailors—we mean librarians, demand it. Your fame is now in its finest nap. Now—before the gloss is off—now is the time for the library form. We have recently received an invoice of Chamois—Russia leather. The library form should be a durable form. We respectfully offer to dress your amazing productions in the library form.<sup>181</sup>

Wonder & Wen’s pitch, and the profits they hope to gain from it, depends upon the notion of the intellectual such idealists as Carlyle and Emerson championed. As Carlyle writes in *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, the heroic writer is “a Preacher preaching not to this parish or that, on this day or that, but to all men in all times and places.”<sup>182</sup> Thanks to the printing press and increased literacy rates, Carlyle argues, books are immortal; they outlast the circumstances of their production and become something more than material. If a writer sees himself as a literary intellectual who produces enduring truths, he will require the durable leather Wonder & Wen provide. Literary industry thus generates capital because it promotes the notion that one can achieve immortality through texts.

Another of the chapter’s imagined letters—from Urquhartian Club’s representative, Donald Dundonald—further elaborates the relationship Melville perceived between industry and transcendentalism. The literary society for which Dundonald sends his appeal to the young Pierre is named for seventeenth-century Scottish writer and exiled aristocrat Sir Thomas Urquhart, known for his translations of Rabelais, his difficult style, and his Royalist allegiances.<sup>183</sup> “The Urquhartian Club for the Immediate Extension of the Limits of all Knowledge, both Human and Divine” issues Pierre an invitation to speak in Zadockprattsville. The location parodies

Prattsville, NY, the founder and architect of which was successful American industrialist, practical technocrat, and Congressman Zadock Pratt.<sup>184</sup> Defined by these references, Dundonald and his fellows “respectfully suggest” Pierre lecture before them on “Human Destiny.” In the new industrial spaces such American technocrats as Pratt hew out of the rural US, elderly American men of letters keep alive the conservative intellectual projects of those who opposed the bourgeois revolutions that engendered these spaces. Melville invites the American writer to speak to the future of the human as a species in this setting, and the effect is comic.

Pratt and Urquhart represent the two positions that structured debates about intellectual practice—both literary and commercial—in the antebellum US. The two could not be more different. They represent opposed agendas, interests, and activities. Pratt is a democratically elected official, a pragmatic man of action, a capitalist, a manager, and a successful tanner. Urquhart is an ostracized noble, a verbose and bawdy writer, and a theorist of a universal language. These figures share in common, however, important assumptions about “knowledge,” the primary object pursued by Dundonald’s literary society. Organized in Urquhart’s name in an upstate town named after Pratt, the club seeks to extend the “Limits of all Knowledge, both Human and Divine.” These limits, Melville suggests, stretch between the rapidly obsolescing European traditions associated at least in name with the philological and aesthetic methods of traditional humanism, on the one hand, and the techniques that successfully and efficiently produce goods, organize mobile populations of industrial laborers, and restructure rural America. The poet, the young and conventional Pierre, is asked to contribute to the Urquhartians’ transcendental project, which Melville invites us to consider in relation to Pratt’s practical industrialism.



Melville's contemporaries would have recognized in Dundonald's literary society and in Zadock Pratt figures and intellectual positions familiar from popular discourse and public life. Business monthlies such as *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine* frequently eulogized figures of Pratt's type. On the lyceum circuit, such charismatic speakers as Emerson adapted traditional European notions of the function of scholars, poets, and philosophers. As Emerson's Harvard address "The American Scholar" (1837) demonstrates, such intellectuals as Emerson defined themselves in opposition to such intellectuals as Pratt.<sup>185</sup> Emerson opened the oration Oliver Wendell Holmes calls America's "intellectual Declaration of Independence" with a contrast of this kind.<sup>186</sup> He champions "the survival of the love of letters amongst a people too busy to give to letters anymore."<sup>187</sup> "Perhaps the time is already come," he tells Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa Society, "when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill."<sup>188</sup> For such technocrats as Zadock Pratt, by contrast, the progressive development of "mechanical skill" Emerson deprecates seemed the highest aim of knowledge production and thinking, as multiple press pieces from the 1840s attest.<sup>189</sup> Emerson claims "young men of the fairest promise... [are] hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire."<sup>190</sup> Such figures as Pratt did not value Emerson's intellectual activity, either.<sup>191</sup>

Popular discourses that celebrated Pratt's business savvy invoked the intellectual practices associated with Emerson's literary investments as a foil against which to tout the virtues of practical administration and commerce. A favorable profile of Pratt in *The American Literary Magazine* (1848) represents this rhetoric. It celebrates the tanner, investor, and Congressman:

Though deprived of the advantages afforded even by our common schools of the present day, Mr. Pratt has acquired much historical and practical knowledge on the chief subjects that effect [sic] the interests of mankind. He asks for no higher complement than to be called a *plain matter-of-fact* man, a *thorough going* business man, a *working* man. He possesses shrewdness and a great degree of good common sense—a virtue of rare cultivation even in educated men...It surely displays no ordinary foresight and energy to conceive and successfully carry forward an enterprise like [the Prattsville tannery], dispensing its blessings upon thousands in the immediate vicinity of its operations, and upon multitudes more remote! It is a luxury at times, even for the student, to turn from the contemplation of profound genius or refined cultivation, to the plain practical man, whose business has been the daily round of hearty industry, yet whose labors have yielded abundant harvest.

This is a technocratic discourse. It celebrates practical labor and experience in business as the basis for knowledge. Through experience, Zadock Pratt becomes an expert better equipped to theorize “the interests of mankind” than do men who waste time reading books. His common sense enterprise favors the multitudes he organizes around it, and accomplishes what educated intellectuals—even the most cultivated and profound among them—cannot. That is, he produces an “abundant harvest” of goods, capital, and the ways of life that attend these. Emerson’s essays “Experience” and “Self-Reliance” share some of these convictions. He also believes intellectuals need to derive knowledge from life experience. Pratt, however, values a brand of technical experience very different from the kinds of metaphysical thinking Emerson endorses.

When Melville invokes Pratt’s name and the village that shares it, Melville calls up the entire world of political, economic, and social organization that attends this discourse in mid-

century America. Pratt is a representative American figure whose individual narrative opens onto broad, systemic changes to life in the US and the intellectual practices that produce them. Another profile of Pratt, from *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, gives us a sense of his broad significance:

[Pratt] is now...the proprietor of the largest tannery in America, perhaps in the world...in the centre of a beautiful village numbering in population some thousand inhabitants, containing an academy erected at his own personal cost, and which he now offers to endow with five thousand dollars, conditioned that a like amount be raised by the inhabitants; two handsome churches, which he aided liberally in building, and still continues to help sustain; a carpet and india rubber manufactory, employing fifty travelling agents; three gristmills, seven sawmills, five shingle machines, six stores, three hotels, four blacksmith shops, and a number of other mechanical trades and professions. With an ample fortune, always ready to assist the industrious, and stimulate them by his advice, his example, and his *protective policy*, (for he encourages every branch of industry in his own village, in preference,) he furnishes forth an illustration of the true 'American system,' and demonstrates how much can be accomplished by a single individual determined on success.<sup>192</sup>

Pratt transforms populations and environments around the aims and methods of industry. His "young and thrifty village, sprung up as it were in a day,"<sup>193</sup> represents a complex and particularly American way of producing life.<sup>194</sup> A single central industry, organized for profit, precedes all other collective endeavors and converts rural space for production. The tannery is the source of and reason for collective enterprise. Around it, populations are conjured up out of nowhere, and can disappear as quickly. Industry precedes the schools, which are secondary in

terms of both value and chronology. It precedes and produces a community that would not exist without it, a community with no project but production and consumption.

A single wealthy individual is the architect of industry and community alike. He is a kind of new aristocrat, as the feudal account of New York society Melville gives at the beginning of *Pierre* suggests. A practical intellectual, Pratt orients toward the useful ends of commerce the knowledge he constructs and offers to others by way of his “advice,” “example,” and “protection.”<sup>195</sup> All the benefits—moral and material—the technocrat produces follow from the transformation of positive data into usable, practical knowledge. The function of Pratt’s thinking is to abstract knowledge from any particular material context, knowledge that can then be applied in all contexts. Standardization follows from the positivist empiricism that underwrites this position—if one can turn hides to leather and men to workers twice as quickly in New York, that knowledge can revolutionize any tanning facility, anytime, anywhere, until others invent more efficient methods along the linear continuum of unending technological progress implicit in Pratt’s brand of mechanical or technological innovation.

Emerson imagines his transcendental notion of intellectual counteracts this “mechanical,” common sense view. His philosophy shares some of the assumptions about the relationship between experience and knowledge such figures as Pratt make, however. In “The American Scholar” and “The Poet,” for instance, Emerson plainly articulates a conception of intellectual activity that reduces the relation between knowledge and experience to a similarly simple model. When he defines the intellectual, “Man Thinking,” as a solitary laborer who transforms experience into permanent knowledge, Emerson makes this clear:

The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him, life; it went

out of him, truth. It came to him, short-lived actions; it went from him, immortal thoughts. It came to him, business; it went from him, poetry. It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought.<sup>196</sup>

For Emerson, the human functions as a kind of sublimating machine able to turn the ephemeral permanent. Experience is “the raw material out of which the intellect molds her splendid products.”<sup>197</sup> The writer transforms this raw matter into knowledge when he or she achieves distance from it, when emotion and affect no longer attend memory. Past experience becomes the object of “calmest observation;” past “actions and events...lie like fair pictures in the air.”<sup>198</sup> Once experience is sanitized in this way, intellectual activity can take the fragile and fleeting stuff of life and render it universal and enduring. As Emerson puts it elsewhere, the writer and thinker moves on from the “temporary state” of life in which he meets the erotic joys of “flowers, pearls, poetry, [and] protestations;” these, Emerson says, “cannot content the awful soul who dwells in clay,” which must “arous[e] itself at last from these endearments, as toys, and pu[t] on the harness, and aspir[e] to vast and universal aims.”<sup>199</sup>

“American Scholar” explains and celebrates some of the outcomes of this view. When Emerson conceives of the relationship between human experience and human thought as a procedure for “transmuting life into truth,” for instance, he renders history an asymptotic striving for an unattainable “purity and imperishableness.” No intellectual product “is quite perfect,” though each strives to be:

As no air-pump can by any means make a perfect vacuum, so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book, or write a book of pure thought, that shall be as efficient, in all respects, to a remote posterity, as to cotemporaries, or rather to the second age. Each age, it is found, must write its own

books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this.<sup>200</sup>

History, Emerson makes clear, does not change because of collective human enterprise; rather, history changes because humans can never cast off the material world, which confines in the tragedy of the local the triumphant and abstract spirit. History results when humans strive to escape, again and again, the embodied transience of their being. Change happens in the world and in discourse, but only because world and discourse continually struggle to annul themselves in a perpetual present. Worldly events are abject, as are the discourses concerned with them.

Emerson's American literary intellectual, who resembles the Old World monk toiling in his sacred and silent monastery or one of the other figures Carlyle celebrates in his hero lectures, sets himself apart from the world of his day. He needs experience, but this experience treats water as wine and the pastoral hills of New England as the entire world. Against the rest of society, which will not acknowledge him if he is performing his proper duties, Emerson's scholar sits "in his private observatory, cataloguing obscure and nebulous stars of the human mind, which as yet no man has thought of as such." He "betray[s] an ignorance and shiftlessness in popular arts, incurring the disdain of the able who shoulder him aside." He must "forgo the living for the dead," and stand in a "state of virtual hostility" to "society."<sup>201</sup> Only in this way, utterly removed from the world of human activity, can he "hear and promulgate" "whatsoever new verdict Reason from her inviolable seat pronounces on the passing men and events of today."<sup>202</sup> The intellectual, for Emerson, ignores history and has nothing to say for it. He addresses his truths to the world from a space above and outside of it.

In "The Poet," Emerson conceives literary writing in similar terms. The essay offers a view of literary activity that differs significantly from the view Melville develops in *Pierre* and

in “Hawthorne and his Mosses.” Emerson believes the literary writer accesses and transcribes timeless truths, as the scholar does, and makes them available for national interests<sup>203</sup>:

For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the songs of the nations.<sup>204</sup>

Poetry’s source is primal, predating worldly human activity, and the poet’s task is not to create or to make but to faithfully record the stable, universal “warblings” he perceives with more or less accuracy. Melville’s poet is after a variable and elusive “truth” he or she can only render briefly, a kind of truth that emerges at the intersection of “heart” and “mind.”<sup>205</sup> A hand not of this earth has already written Emerson’s brand of truth, and the poet simply copies out that which ethereal agencies have determined.

By this account, the writer is the reader’s liberator. He alone can access transcendental truths, and this capacity frees him from the material constraints, necessities, and entanglements of earthly life. He shares these truths with the reading public. Because poets “cannot die,” Emerson writes, they “are thus liberating gods...They are free, and they make free...I think nothing is of any value in books, excepting the transcendental and extraordinary.”<sup>206</sup> Poetry achieves its aims when the writer releases himself from historical particularity—from his relations in time and space—and enables the reader to do the same. His material is also unworldly.

The visions of intellectual activity Pratt and Emerson offer clearly differ. Transcendentalists and technocrats do not mean the same thing when they privilege “experience.” Neither do they imagine the kind of “knowledge” intellectuals produce from “experience” in the same way. One pursues divine and eternal essences while the other gathers efficient and universally applicable positivist data. What they share, however, is a desire for the universal, for that which remains relevant once removed from the time and place that engenders it. This shared desire renders transcendentalism unable to challenge the technocratic discourses it imagines itself to counter. As Melville demonstrates, the consequences that follow from this common intellectual aspiration are profound, violent, and dangerous, for both the writer and the public.

I read the carnage that results when Pierre abandons the literary forms that brought him early commercial successes for the transcendental project that culminates in spectacular catastrophe as the outgrowth of intellectual projects that attempt to “systematize the unsystematizable,” in Melville’s words. In the novel, Pierre imagines his literary project in terms of both of the modes of intellectual practice Melville criticizes. Both projects, too, produce in Pierre a powerful loathing—for himself, for others, and for the world—that grows over the course of the novel to a towering and murderous hatred. Pierre is “Timonized”<sup>207</sup>—a favorite word of Melville’s for the process by which one becomes a misanthrope—when his work reproduces conventions *and* when his work attempts to impart lofty truths none of his contemporaries can understand.

The misplaced desires of the literary scene Pierre encounters as a young poet introduce loathing into the life of the writer very early. Beset on all sides by the appeals to his vanity he believes emerge from economic motives, Pierre begins to resent the admiring readers for whom



the work that reproduces conventional ways of thinking and acting is the superior work. Against his own early commercial achievements then, Pierre abandons (as Melville himself did) the methods that brought him success and attention. Before he leaves for New York with Isabel and Delly, he burns the bundle of early poems and letters he has come to regard with “peculiar nervous detestation and contempt.”<sup>208</sup> Once established in the city, and with no marketable skills with which to support the others, Pierre again sits down to write. Now he imagines his project as Emerson or Carlyle would. If his earlier work, successful as it was, made him a misanthrope, his work as a disseminator of transcendental truths *begins* with his hatred for the world. Pierre becomes a writer in order to earn a living, but he also, and more importantly, conceives of his writing as a way to transform his experiences after he meets Isabel into moral and metaphysical knowledge. He aspires to “gospelize the world anew,”<sup>209</sup> to fashion into prose the “sun-like glories of god-like truth and virtue...ever obscured by the dense fogs of earth”<sup>210</sup> he feels his experience has revealed to him. Pierre’s vision of these truths, which follow “the wonderful vital world-revelation so suddenly made to Pierre at the Meadows,” “fairly Timonize” a writer who has already succumbed to the mild Timonization the flattery of literary industry inspires.

Antipathy for the world thus starts Pierre on his Emersonian quest to synthesize from the abject particular the eternal and universal. “Swayed to universality of thought by the wisely-explosive mental tendencies of the profound events which had lately befallen him, and the unprecedented situation in which he now found himself,”<sup>211</sup> Pierre tries to generalize his individual hardships into a pedagogical work that will read as reality, rather than as romance. The pain and difficulty of Pierre’s flight to New York with his working-class, French half-sister, followed by his disinheritance and the death of his mother, stir his “burning desire to deliver what he thought to be new, or at least miserably neglected Truth to the world.”<sup>212</sup> The particular

truths Pierre learns as he moves through the novel's melodramatic plot of tragic reversals disclose the cruel and brutal nature of a world the wealthy young Pierre once thought a place of kindness, pleasure, and love.

Melville demonstrates the transcendentalist's position does not offer an alternative to the violent US culture the injustices of which Pierre wants to change. Indeed, the mode of intellectual activity by which Pierre seeks to disseminate this truth—that we must love all others even if we don't understand them and their differences, even if their differences seem to threaten our ways of life—proves to be inherently violent itself. The transcendental writer, Pierre's encounters soon demonstrate, experiences the mutual resentment Emerson understood to be intrinsic to the modes of intellectual practice he privileged. As Emerson's scholar does, Pierre removes himself from a world he despises for its ignorance and the world in its turn loathes the incomprehensible, esoteric project he adopts against all practical concerns. Transcendental intellectual practice, the novel demonstrates, thus presupposes a cruel and violent relationship between world and writer as the condition of possibility for knowledge production. The hateful underpinnings of this relationship render transcendental intellectual practice radically incompatible with the message of divine and unconditional love Pierre and others espouse. The disparity between method and message, therefore, cannot counter the interests the novel aligns with industry, wealth, and technocratic intellectual practice in the US.

Melville traces the increasing isolation and growing misanthropy of a writer who understands his task to be that of the transcendentalist. When he invites us to “peep over the shoulder of Pierre and see what it is he is writing there, in that most melancholy closet,” we are briefly privy to the “reeking pile”<sup>213</sup> of pages in which Pierre rails angrily against philosophy and the Western tradition of letters, as Emerson did in “Self-Reliance” and elsewhere. In the excerpts

and fragments Melville presents, Pierre's protagonist Vivian calls Spinoza and Plato "sophomoric" and Goethe an "inconceivable coxcomb," the useless, "pretentious," and "heartless part of a man."<sup>214</sup> Pierre's narrator, in a voice more spirited than Vivian's, asks his reader to lament with him Vivian's plight.<sup>215</sup> Vivian toils away at the writing desk, as Pierre does. The content of Pierre's novel thus becomes the act of writing a novel, here portrayed as unbearable torture.

Pierre, his narrator, and his protagonist all find the act of novel writing unnatural, a bizarre negation, for dubious motives, of the novelist's youth, beauty, and virility. The act of writing a novel, by this model, becomes the act of condemning novel writing. That is, to write the kind of novel Pierre imagines—one that can "goseplize" and liberate the world by offering it universal truths exclusive to the brilliant, gifted writer persecuted by contemporaneity—is only to write of the pain, violence, and despair writing such a text engenders. The narrator Pierre invents makes the act of writing an act of utter loathing very different from the message of love he sets out to impart. As Pierre's narrator cries out in an excerpt from his tormented book: "I hate the world, and could trample all lungs of mankind as grapes, and heel them out of their breath, to think of the woe and the cant,—to think of the Truth and the Lie!"<sup>216</sup> To imagine "Truth" as something universal and timeless, something the gifted, enlightened few can bring to a world it exists in spite of, as Emerson imagines it in "The American Scholar" and elsewhere, is to *hate* the world and to wish for its destruction. Pierre's narrator, engaged in the "immature" attempt to arrive at this metaphysical brand of truth, wants to kill, to crush and trample, those he would set free with his words. Pierre's novel can only talk about itself, and this act is not an act of love, but of abhorrence. It produces nothing, but wants only to destroy. Pierre thus mistakes the worldly act of writing for a transcendental one, just as he mistook the worldly act of loving Isabel for a

heavenly one. After both errors follow consequences that introduce misanthropic violence into an enterprise that claims to “liberate” readers and open their eyes.

Pierre’s view of literary activity starkly contrasts the Melville’s erotic vision by which Melville imagines reader and poet mutually construct a shared world of feeling and thinking. Pierre wants to deliver readers from the contingencies and crises of life on earth. Melville, through his narrator, deepens the reader’s sense of those contingent and difficult entanglements. Pierre resembles Emerson, who argues a poet can “help” a reader “escape the custody of that body in which he is pent up, and of that jail-yard of individual relations in which he is enclosed.”<sup>217</sup> Melville’s narrator instead draws the reader into a reciprocal, worldly relation. Pierre wants to free both reader and writer from any worldly responsibility or relation at all.

*Pierre* suggests literary writing that loves the world can offers us, not a body of knowledge, but an occasion to explore the relationship between knowing and experiencing. *Pierre* stages an occasion for thinking that foregrounds its own conditions for possibility, and it self-consciously draws attention to the narrative protocols that distinguish this encounter from others between writers and readers. *Pierre* requires of readers a constant repositioning, a constant attention to the novel’s difficult thrusts and shifts between sincerity and irony, intensity and humor, pain and pleasure, appreciation and disgust. These variations perform inconsistency, and so constitute the novel’s erotic project. Rather than convert Melville’s experiences in New York or at sea to *Pierre*’s lesson, or Pierre’s experiences with Isabel to his own novel’s lesson through protagonist Vivia, *The Ambiguities* requires readers to question at every turn how events might become wisdom, to question who is presenting what, and why. *Pierre*’s narrative form necessarily looks closely at and pulls back from whatever subject it turns to, making its intimate movements and intentions visible to the reader. Self-aware turnings of this kind perform a love

for the world. Melville refuses to claim for literature an ability to reveal everything about its subject. The novel lays bare the process by which it attempts to reveal the elusive “truths” it senses but knows cannot be permanently exposed without the violence of God or industry.

#### 4.0 BELOVED LANGUAGE AND HISTORICAL VIOLENCE IN JEAN TOOMER'S *CANE*

In June 2013, the US Supreme Court invalidated a key provision of the *Voting Rights Act* of 1965. Several states (mostly in the south) would no longer have to appeal to the federal government in order to change their election practices.<sup>218</sup> Chief Justice Roberts and a conservative majority argued the *Voting Rights Act* had been so successful at preventing discriminatory voting practices that the regulatory bulwark it set against racially motivated prejudices could be dismantled.<sup>219</sup> According to the majority opinion Roberts read out, the “extraordinary measures” the court had employed in the 1960s to “address an extraordinary problem” were no longer necessary.<sup>220</sup> The supposed state of exception the original act tried to mitigate—what a previous court described as “an insidious and pervasive evil [...] perpetuated in certain parts of our country through unremitting and ingenious defiance of the Constitution”—was over. Roberts did not say so, but we can guess at the factors the court had in mind when it explained that everything had changed over the past forty years. America elected its first black President to a second term in 2012. In addition, the idea that the federal government should regulate or oversee the activities of state and private institutions is not popular among the court’s majority, as the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision (2010) indicated.

A month after the Roberts’ court’s decision, however, a significant event called into question the court’s optimistic assessment of contemporary race politics in the US. In February

of 2013, a Florida man, George Zimmerman, had killed an unarmed African American teenager, Trayon Martin, as Martin returned from a convenience store one night.<sup>221</sup> In July 2013—two or three weeks after Roberts announced “extraordinary circumstances” no longer required “extraordinary measures”—a Florida jury decided Zimmerman should not be held accountable for any wrongdoing. This incident was the first of several to come to the attention of the US public, and it revived a public conversation about race in the US dormant since the L.A. riots of the early 1990s. Martin’s killing, and the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner that followed in 2014 (both were killed by police officers grand juries did not hold responsible), demonstrate that the extraordinary emergency Roberts’ predecessors had described in the 1960s continues to shape daily life and lead to death for Americans.

For many of the activists, protestors, artists, and intellectuals stirred by these events, three words today describe the problem the unrecognized deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and others represent: “Black Lives Matter.” Popular media forms have shaped and enabled contemporary conversations about anti-black racism, and these forms encourage brevity. The slogan, shared across social media and inscribed on signs at a wave of national protests, names in brief the logic many believe is a barrier to democracy, equality, and justice for large populations in the US today. Theorist Judith Butler recently glossed the phrase in *The New York Times*: “If black lives do not matter, then they are not really regarded as lives, since a life is supposed to matter. So what we see is that some lives matter more than others, that some lives matter so much that they need to be protected at all costs, and that other lives matter less, or not at all.”<sup>222</sup> Two senses of the verb “matter” seem to be at play within this slogan. To “matter” is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “to be important.” While the law recognizes, as Butler says, that all lives are supposed to be important, all lives are not, in practice treated this way. In a

sense, “Black Lives Matter” registers a typical disconnect between “theory” or “law” and implementation, practice, or experience. As such, it also names a disconnection between two categories of human experience. The phrase indicates a rupture between the rational activities we take up when we invent and modify laws and the felt sense of value or importance that animates us when we act as if something “matters” to us. This choice of the words “Black Lives Matter” suggests groups who experience the racialized violence of our moment describe what threatens their lives and liberties in terms of emotion, affect, and imagination. “Black lives” do not signify as possible objects of love and care within the system of value and meaning that rules the US today. This is a problem of love (*eros*) and of imagination, and its persistence suggests the Roberts’ court might have acted prematurely when it repealed section 5 of the *Voting Rights Act*.

How can democratic and liberatory projects today confront the racialized violence that continues to threaten them? In this chapter, I suggest Jean Toomer’s literary writings of the 1920s might be a resource for those who try to address this question in our present. I believe Toomer’s work speaks to us today for at least two reasons. First, Toomer struggled to address race violence in his moment with the same care for imagination and love the slogan “Black Lives Matter” reprises. Although Toomer argues in his early writings for a rational approach to what he calls “race hatred,” by the 1920s he had moved away from the conventional language of the socialist party to pursue the same ends by singular literary or poetic means. Toomer understood that US power, which he connected to the personal and collective brands of racialized crises he confronted, operated in his time through “desire and imagination,” as Anthony Bogues puts it in *Empire of Liberty: Power, Desire, and Freedom*. Toomer therefore sought to counter the violence he witnessed throughout the US by inventing new literary forms he believed could encourage new forms of self- and communal love. Because Toomer, a biracial writer, moved



between various communities, he stages in his work the difficulties and promises an artist committed to such work might face.

Toomer is thus an important figure in the history of the American imagination, and a precursor for many of the discourses we use to explain the affective function of power and violence today. In addition, Toomer's historical moment resembles our present in a few ways that render his work especially worthy of our attention. In the "Red Summer" of 1919, race riots exacerbated by poverty and migration broke out in Chicago, Washington, D.C. (Toomer's home), and the south. The Chicago riots erupted after a group of white bathers killed a young black swimmer who drifted among them at the beach. As the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown did last year, this young man's death encouraged black Americans to oppose white violence in a way Toomer and many others believed was unprecedented. The riots, Toomer wrote in 1919, announced "the Negro [was] openly resolved and prepared to resist attacks upon his person and privileges."<sup>223</sup> Our present, in which activists and allies belonging to a number of diverse groups continue to pursue changes of this kind, follows from this earlier moment. Matching our present with this past also demonstrates the Supreme Court was wrong in 1965 to describe its own moment as "extraordinary." Disenfranchisement and death have been utterly ordinary for black Americans since the invention of US democracy. Toomer's literary work responded to these significant conditions.

Toomer's moment also shares with our own a similar set of economic circumstances. Toomer linked these to the racial conflicts he witnessed, a practice democratic movements might emulate today. In the early twentieth century, before devastating depression and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal transformed the US, economic inequalities on par with those late capitalism today produces pervaded life in the US and elsewhere.<sup>224</sup> As Paul Krugman has put it,

“Pre-New Deal America, like America in the early twenty-first century, was a land of vast inequality in wealth and power, in which a nominally democratic political system failed to represent the economic interests of the majority.”<sup>225</sup> Toomer believed this broad set of economic conditions ultimately pitted poor whites and poor blacks against each other. Toomer argued “the causes of race prejudice may primarily be found in the economic structure that compels one worker to compete against another,” so those “who would aid in the present crisis would do well to focus attention and action upon those fundamental and determining causes which have irresistibly drawn the Negro into his present position.” Toomer’s understanding of racialized violence in the 1920s, which he shared with W.E.B. DuBois and a number of other significant black intellectuals and artists, encourages us to identify the broad and structural elements that continue to inspire it. Toomer’s literary work responds to these conditions with imaginative forms he believes encourage and mobilize a brand of love that might counter the inhuman logics of inequality he sees shape life in his moment. Because some of these logics are still at work today, I believe the historical and poetic approach to these problems, which I trace throughout this chapter, remains instructive.

The chapter that follows suggests projects committed to the imagination—a human faculty Toomer and others demonstrate one can exercise with love—might have advantages other ways of addressing the problem of inequality in the US do not. Conservatives, for instance, today offer a range of responses to the challenges democracy faces in our moment, but these often condone violence and deny historical factors contribute to human action.<sup>226</sup> Some politicians and journalists on the right continue to insist individual criminals are at fault whenever race conflicts arise, so they propose solutions grounded in violence. The popular conservative media outlet Fox News regularly publishes editorials that outline positions of this

kind. As a typical Fox News op-ed argued in the days after a grand jury cleared Darren Wilson, the Ferguson, MO police officer who killed Michael Brown, of any charges:

there was absolutely no evidence Officer Darren Wilson was motivated by race and he did exactly what he should have done. Brown's robbery of the convenience store, his decision to reach into the police car and punch Wilson while trying to take his gun, and finally Brown's decision to charge Wilson was what caused the teen's death. Under Missouri law, people can defend themselves with deadly force if they have a 'reasonable belief' they need to use it to protect themselves against serious injury or death.<sup>227</sup>

This language exemplifies the anti-historical view of contemporary life conservatives often promote. It assigns responsibility to the individual and denies individuals are historical subjects shaped by history. If Wilson was not consciously "motivated by race," then a history of race relations did not contribute to this scene. Given this view, grounded as it is in an autonomous view of the individual subject, "deadly force" is the solution the right offers. Brown, an autonomous agent, caused his own death with his criminal behavior, and Wilson exercised his right to protect himself by killing him.

In contrast to this view, Toomer offers a vision of race violence in the US grounded in history and shaped by human activities. He connects the actions of individuals of all races to the broader economic and historical forces he believes engender them. Because he views human life this way, he suggests in *Cane* the poet has a special role to play for projects of democratic transformation. He privileges approaches to political change that inspire love and affect through language's sensuous properties. At the same time, I argue, Toomer is aware of and emphasizes the limitations of the poet's power to produce change. Below, I describe the difficulties and triumphs Toomer faced as he worked to invent a poetry that could alleviate the violent injustices

he and others confronted in the US. First, however, I want to briefly differentiate my reading from Toomer from other contemporary critical approaches to his work.

### ***Cane's Critics and the Value of Poetry***

I believe an approach to Toomer that emphasizes his turn to poetry helps us value his work in ways dominant critical approaches do not encourage. Contemporary critics often celebrate Toomer as a social and political actor who believed art was an activity by which one could effect political change. They therefore emphasize and celebrate the political views that were important to him in the years before he wrote *Cane*. Toomer's early commitment to socialism, for instance, is significant for his thinking, and it informs *Cane's* commitments. Critics do not, however, often emphasize his commitment to the poetic or literary as a privileged category of creative (and political) human activity.

In their important and careful study *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History* (1998), for instance, Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr emphasize *Cane's* "social and political dimensions, [...] the historical background of the times and Toomer's intricate and evolving connection to them."<sup>228</sup> They pose this project against the body of Toomer scholarship and biography Darwin T. Turner, Cynthia Earl Kerman, Richard Eldridge, and others assemble in the 1980s, which, they argue, presents Toomer as a transcendentalist and does not contextualize Toomer's work adequately. In the years since Scruggs and VanDemarr published their monograph, attention to these "dimensions" and "backgrounds"—the key mode of critical engagement for new historicist methodologies popular in the US academy since the 1980s—now defines Toomer scholarship.<sup>229</sup>

Scruggs and VanDemarr recuperate Toomer's interest in socialism during the *Cane* years and recover his "militant leftist" reaction to the race riots of 1919. They draw important

distinctions between Toomer's writings in the early 1920s and the critical and creative pieces he produced later, when his explicitly "spiritual" commitments, first to the New Age program of Georges Gurdjieff and eventually to the Quaker faith, absorbed him. To do so, Scruggs and VanDemarr sift through and move across the still mostly unpublished set of complicated, often contradictory autobiographical materials Toomer composed over the course of a rich and varied life. Scruggs and VanDemarr celebrate the explicitly political and social commitments they find in Toomer's writings before 1923 and distinguish them from his explicitly religious works. They counter the spiritual narratives of an abiding "hunger for wholeness" such biographers as Kerman and Eldridge construct to unify Toomer's life. *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History* suggests contemporary readers should value Toomer, Frank, and others because they devoted themselves in the past to progressive political and social change.<sup>230</sup>

In my view, this assessment of Toomer's politics does not account for his commitment to loving, poetic activity as a mode of political practice. For this reason, a historicist approach might not help us identify the political value *Cane* offers the present. Toomer's literary and critical writings clearly demonstrate he and the "Young Americans" he joined engaged passionately with a specific set of historical, social, and political questions through a kind of imaginative activity they believed distinct from other modes of political practice. As I demonstrate in the sections that follow, Toomer celebrates language's material properties, its sounds and rhythms, as the root of his power to produce change. In "Kabnis," Toomer suggests the poet's facility with his material might work against the brutal realities of history he confronts. Poetry, *Cane* proposes, might counter the violence Toomer believes state and market practices produce in the US precisely because its effects differ from those rhetorical language practices

achieve. By portraying his artists as lovers who strive to act with fidelity to their love for people, places, and communities, Toomer affirms art as a sensuous, worldly activity.

### **Toomer's Romantic Vignettes and Modern Crisis**

Jean Toomer's singular literary achievement, *Cane*, is a record of his struggle in the early 1920s to become a writer adequate to the forms of life he experienced and encountered in his travels around the US. Toomer speaks of this struggle in letters to Waldo Frank, Gorham Munson, and other friends, and stages it in the various formal experiments he tries out in *Cane*. The book plays over a range of narrative and lyric voices and cycles through diverse genres, moving from prose and verse to drama. Even the narrative perspective we encounter most often in the prose pieces—the male voice of a figure Munson calls in a late review of *Cane* “the spectatorial artist” (186)—changes from one vignette to the next. Sometimes, Toomer's artists speak as educated Northerners who visit the South and tell us its stories, as unnamed first-person narrators do in “Carma” and “Fern.” At other moments, the artist seems to belong to the Georgia community he describes, as he does in “Becky.” In “Karintha” and “Blood-Burning Moon,” the artist speaks as an anonymous third person narrator, and in “Bona and Paul,” “Box Seat,” and “Kabnis,” he is not a narrator but a character Toomer portrays. This variety indicates Toomer does not establish in *Cane* a fixed relationship between writer, subject, and material. The book seems instead a reflection upon the relationship between these, as Toomer explores simultaneously the function of the artist, the race violence pervasive in the Jim Crow US of the 1920s, and the powers and limits of musical and figurative language.

At the same time, a single theme unifies *Cane*. Most of Toomer's poems and lyrical narratives call up a world of deep erotic passion and loss, so that the book is, above all, about love. Because *Cane* touches erotic disappointment more often than erotic fulfillment, it is a

catalogue of love's failures. Toomer surveys prostitution, miscarriage, rape, promiscuity, domestic violence, love unrequited thanks to class division, and interracial union, which leads in one case to lynching. He interweaves stories of failed intimacy and frustrated romance with the different erotic tragedies his spectatorial artists all experience. Toomer's artist figures are usually lovers who fail in two distinct but related ways to win what they desire. They want the love of women, and they want to transform the women they love. Toomer imbues these attempts to make love, none of which are successful, with great significance, as if a larger struggle for change is at stake in every erotic meeting. As writers have done at least since Plato, *Cane* thus yokes together two orders of erotic activity. It poses its questions about the nature and value of creative work through the questions of human love it raises.

In this chapter, I argue that Toomer grounds the tentative vision of art *Cane* develops in a kind of love he distinguishes from the other erotic motivations he sees dominate US life in his moment. For Toomer, the artist wields tremendous power to transform a world plagued by the many modern ills Toomer lists in the unpublished (and undated<sup>231</sup>) meditation "The Negro Emergent":

The chaos and strain of these times, the lack of functioning religion, religious pretense and charlatanism, the reaction from these to materialism, industrialism, the ideal of material success, a devitalizing puritanism, herd psychology, the premium placed on individuality, the stupidities, lies, and superstitions that Mr. Menken has warred on, and so on, and so on.<sup>232</sup>

Throughout *Cane*, Toomer's artist figures encounter women and men debilitated in various ways by these "elements" of American "civilization" (89), which transcend race in their far-reaching effects. Misdirected appetites, misplaced faith, and enervating bourgeois proprieties organize and

inhibit the forms of life Toomer's artists find in Georgia, Washington, D.C., and Wisconsin. Toomer imagines the artist can, out of a radical love different from the passions that animate sex, faith, and marriage, counter these elements. Love motivates his artist figures and is the source of art's transformative potential. Toomer hopes to share with and inspire in readers new ways of caring passionately for the world, the self, and others. At the same time, he explores the limits of the artist's desire to do so.

I trace through two of *Cane's* vignettes and its concluding drama the nature, power, and limits of the artist's love as Toomer conceives it. The prose works in *Cane* invent a particular brand of poetic love and turn it toward radical change in two ways. First, Toomer's stories stage encounters between beautiful women and artists who love them. In "Fern" and "Avey," Toomer's artist figures strive to open "new horizons" of thought and feeling, as Toomer puts it in "Fern," to women they love. These women suffer under the range of civilizational evils Toomer opposes. Fern, a transcendental figure, cannot love the world. Avey "dissipates" herself in sensual pleasure. This theme also runs through other vignettes, as when Muriel (in "Box Seat") "cages" herself in the tepid materialisms of black middle class life. Toomer's artists try to "help" each of them, but in every case, the artist faces insurmountable obstacles. In "Kabnis," Toomer pursues the same themes of poetic creation, grounded in a love for others, in another way. Kabnis, an analogue for Toomer, inhabits a world of intellectual and economic relationships Toomer portrays as primarily male, but he faces failures similar to those the book's other lovers confront. "Kabnis" questions most explicitly the notion that an artist or any other individual can act simply and effectively in a complex and troubled world for a particular end. Narrators and characters thus come, in *Cane*, to the particularly modern crises of action and epistemology that pervade life after the bourgeois revolutions of the late eighteenth century. Toomer struggles to



align, on the one hand, his sense that the artist's passions might open onto fresh and vital modes of thinking and feeling in a world without absolute truth or stable authority, with, on the other, his sense that the artist cannot easily transform others as he wills. Ultimately, Toomer's artists fail in *Cane* to effect change, and the presentation of this failure becomes itself the artist's work.

This reading of Toomer's erotic motifs extends two lines of critical interest in *Cane*. First, I emphasize *Cane*'s departure from the romantic and idealist traditions Toomer sometimes celebrated in his letters. Although Waldo Frank's nationalist idealist view of art and history inspired Toomer, *Cane* ultimately opposes and exceeds this vision. This distinction helps account for the fact that we still read Toomer, but not Frank.<sup>233</sup> It also situates Toomer alongside his other, more prolific contemporaries, who, confronting the similar problem of how to direct desire and passion without metaphysical authority, sometimes turned to fascism or conservatism. As Frank Kermode has said, the fictions such modernist writers as Eliot and Pound produced in the early twentieth century are "related to others, which helped to shape the disastrous history of our time,"<sup>234</sup> and "what we feel about all these men at times is perhaps that they retreated into some paradigm, into a timeless and unreal vacuum from which all reality had been pumped."<sup>235</sup> Toomer refuses to turn away from or to alleviate too quickly the enormous difficulties he confronts as he pursues through art his desires for change. Although Toomer does not offer as an alternative to idealism a fully historical and secular view of human life in *Cane*, he identifies and feels the difficulty central to any way of writing that would attempt to do so. As "Kabnis" demonstrates, Toomer understands this difficulty is fundamental to the function of language, the material the poet has at hand. Toomer foregrounds what Frank refuses to admit—that the historical and material properties of words disrupt the idealist's desire to will a world.

Second, I develop connections many critics have observed between Toomer's vision of art and his treatment of women in *Cane*.<sup>236</sup> Toomer raises his expansive questions about art, action, and love by contemplating—and inviting an audience of readers he assumes are educated, heterosexual males to contemplate—beautiful women. Undoubtedly, Toomer treats art as “a male preserve,” in Barbara Foley's words, and tends in his letters to women toward “condescension,” as Mark Whalan says.<sup>237</sup> Toomer's erotic themes play a fundamental role in his conception of art, however, that is not reducible to misogyny.

Several significant features of Toomer's poetics depend upon the various approaches to women he makes throughout the book. As I demonstrate in what follows, Toomer's artists hope to affect the women they encounter in much the same way they hope to transform the male readership they address. The function of the artist, as Toomer imagines it, is to reveal to others radical and different possibilities for subject-object relationships—for feeling, thought, and ultimately, love. I read *Cane*'s female characters as figures that embody broader collectives and trope in the text the larger audiences Toomer wants his words to touch. The artist's failure to influence these figures also restages a problem central to American literary traditions. Toomer joins Frank, Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, and others who feel keenly, in the tradition of Emerson's “American Scholar,” the divide between the poet and the people, the intellectual and the masses, the “ideal” and the “real,” in the US.<sup>238</sup> Toomer approaches through narratives of love the question Tony Tanner finds fundamental for American writers: “to what extent the notion of a ‘democratic literature’ might prove to be a contradiction in terms—at least as we concurrently, if vaguely, think of ‘literature.’”<sup>239</sup>

Further, it is precisely because Toomer's female characters seem to men possible objects of sensual desire that they become a locus for the crisis moments Toomer's artists face

throughout the text.<sup>240</sup> Art, Toomer's lush and opulent language shows, depends upon the sensuous, and thus shares much with other kinds of erotic love. Toomer is a lover of sound, rhythm, and color. He appreciates the material and corporeal qualities of objects in and for themselves, lingering over texture, shape, and music. Lovers also experience with heightened attention their objects of love, and they too value the sensuous as itself an end. Thus, Toomer describes himself in an early letter to poet Georgia Douglas Johnson as "the man in love with life in toto."<sup>241</sup> As an artist, he extends to all he encounters what lovers feel for each other. Toomer returns to this theme in the earliest of several unpublished autobiographies, uniting all of his many activities, including his literary writing, under the banner of love: "All my life, I have had one main quest; and in so far as I have been moved by inner impulse, my turns, returns, leaps, and crossings have followed love. And as with them, so my sufferings and joys have sprung from love's defeats and fulfillments."<sup>242</sup> By the time he wrote these words, Toomer had abandoned literary writing to follow and share the teachings of Armenian mystic Georges Gurdjieff. In *Cane*, however, Toomer calls readers to follow him through the "leaps and crossings" that distinguish the artist's love for life from the erotic interests of others. The relationships between men and women Toomer explores play a fundamental role in this task.

If we read *Cane* as a text that meets with love modernity's violence and the crises of action and thought modernity inaugurates, we can understand and value it in ways critical approaches to the book since its recovery in the late 1960s do not always emphasize.<sup>243</sup> *Cane* is a formally innovative work composed by a marginalized, biracial writer any account of American literary tradition excludes to its detriment. In it, Toomer criticizes dominant political, economic, and cultural discourses, represents and challenges brutal race violence, and disrupts conventional identity categories. We can add to these achievements the rigorous attention Toomer devotes

throughout the book to articulating art's significance as a powerful human activity distinct from others. Its power, he demonstrates, grows out of love.

### **Love's New Horizons: "Fern" and "Avey"**

Among the prose vignettes that compose *Cane's* Georgia section, "Fern" explores most explicitly Toomer's vision of the artist's nature and function. One of Toomer's Northern spectators narrates the piece. He is, as Toomer was, widely traveled, and he opens his account of his encounter with Fern onto a broad and richly textured picture of Southern life his range of experience informs. He describes Fern, "resting listless-like on the railing of her porch" (19) beside the Dixie Pike:

Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples, in such a way that wherever your glance may momentarily have rested, it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes. [...] If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta. They were strange eyes. In this, that they sought nothing—that is, nothing that was obvious and tangible and that one could see, and they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied. When a woman seeks, you will have observed, her eyes deny. Fern's eyes desired nothing that you could give her; there was no reason why they should withhold. Men saw her eyes and fooled themselves. Fern's eyes said to them that she was easy (18).

An impressionist rendering of color and movement, the portrait establishes at once the narrator is an artist whose material is language. He presents to readers a particular view of Fern that depends upon the series of tropes he interweaves. Seeing Fern's eyes, which draw into them like

rivers her other features, the countryside she surveys, and the gazes of others, is like hearing a sorrowful hymn a cantor issues out of the sublime Hebraic tradition. At the end of the vignette, we learn that Fern is Jewish—her name, Toomer tells us in conclusion, is Fernie May Rosen—and the narrator introduces her to us here as if her body is a sorrowful hymn in another form.

This observation, which encourages us to read Fern's heritage as both bodily and generic (her body is a song) typifies the perspective of the narrative persona Toomer invents. That special perspective, more, than Fern's identity, is Toomer's preoccupation in the vignette. "Anyone, of course, [can] see" Fern on her porch, Toomer writes, but the artist sees her differently, and this is what matters.<sup>244</sup> The narrator's reading of Fern discloses her relationship as a subject to the world she perceives and links this way of being to an ancient (and ethic) tradition of song. Though he notices and celebrates the same features that compel and attract other men, the artist does not misread as they do Fern's appearance. Others mistake her fundamental lack of desire for its opposite, desire, or at least for a willingness to make and take pleasure in love. The narrator knows Fern seeks nothing "obvious and tangible," that she denies nothing because she wants nothing. Men "brin[g] her their bodies" and learn too late she cannot be "satisfied that way," as Ralph Kabnis says he cannot be in the play that concludes *Cane*.

Toomer's portrait of Fern quickly becomes a portrait of her lovers and of the Southern community the artist visits. Fern presents a fundamental problem to those who encounter her, and she seems to call men to a kind of action that exceeds the imagination:

When [Fern] was young, a few men took her, but got no joy from it. And then, once done, they felt bound to her (quite unlike their hit and run with other girls), felt as though it would take them a lifetime to fulfill an obligation which they could find no name for. They became attached to her, and hungered after finding the barest trace of what she

might desire. [...] She did not deny them, yet the fact was that they were denied. A sort of superstition crept into their consciousness of her being somehow above them. Being above them meant that she was not to be approached by anyone. She became a virgin (18).

Fern's eyes promise her lovers the kind of erotic satisfaction they expect from casual love. Instead of fulfilling these men, however, she inspires in them new, inexplicable, and interminable longings they themselves cannot name or staunch. She extends to them her own inability to love anything tangible. They are "bound to her" by the desire to find something she desires. (Toomer's portrait anticipates Lacan's theories of desire). Each thinks he must "do some fine thing for her"—bring her "candy," "deed" a house to her, send her anonymous and "magnificent" wedding gifts. Her lovers can imagine offering her only the material and sensual pleasures available in their "small southern town," none of which will suffice. They find in her an absence of worldly desire so extreme it destroys their own capacity to be gratified by intimacy, breaks the link between intention and action ("she did not deny them, yet the fact was they were denied"), and disrupts the community's distinctions between chaste and wanton women. Because Fern takes no pleasure in sensual love, she becomes "a virgin" again.

Fern's lack of desire for anything identifiable disturbs conventional ways of life in the village and therefore requires of others some response. In contrast to other men, the artist understands this. His portrait suggests Fern's interior life has within her community great effects he extends beyond the drama of individual experience. Contemporary reviewers of *Cane*, among them Alain Locke, Montgomery Gregory, and Gorham Munson, celebrated Toomer for elevating to the level of the universal human his African American characters. Many characterized Toomer's achievement as Waldo Frank did in his introduction to *Cane*: "A poet has arisen in the

land who writes, not as a Southerner, not as a rebel against Southerners, not as a Negro, not as apologist or priest or critic: who writes as a *poet*. [...] The artist must lose such lesser identities in the great well of life” in order to say of his material ““This is human”” (117). Toomer’s narrator considers the problem Fern presents in these broader terms. In his role as a spectatorial artist, he frames for readers Fern’s dilemma as an ontological one:

Besides, picture if you can, this cream-colored solitary girl sitting at a tenement window looking down on the indifferent throngs of Harlem. Better that she listens to folk-songs at dusk in Georgia, you would say, and so would I. [...] You and I know, who have had experience with such things, that love is not a thing like prejudice which can be bettered by changes of town (19).

“Love,” not “prejudice,” afflicts Fern, and so her condition is not particular to her surroundings. The miseries prejudice inflicts depend upon time and place. They are social and political, and they “can be bettered by changes of town.” The same is not true, the artist believes, of love’s trials and agonies. Because Fern is unable to love anything the world provides, she might as well stay in Georgia, which is, from the perspective of the artist, at least more beautiful than New York. Toomer invites readers to conclude with him Fern’s indifference arises from a generalizable human condition.

Although Toomer presents Fern this way, his aim does not seem to be to universalize his material or to “lose” his “lesser identities in the great well of life.” Rather, the narrator foregrounds his particular position and speaks to a specific audience. His view of Fern depends upon the fact that he is a well-traveled Northern intellectual and a man, and he assumes his readers are, too. More, he does not speak as a mere spectator who reports and elevates local events. As he develops and considers the dilemma Fern presents to her lovers and her

community, he feels what other men feel. The same pull of obligation sex engenders in Fern's lovers seizes the artist as soon as he sees her: "But at first sight of her I felt as if I heard a Jewish cantor sing. As if his singing rose above the unheard chorus of a folk-song. And I felt bound to her. I too had my dreams: something I would do for her" (19). Here, as elsewhere in *Cane*, Toomer transmutes seeing and singing—a face is a voice, trees sing, bodies are words, etc. The artist experiences the world with heightened attention to its sensuous elements, and he feels as an outpouring of music he connects to Fern's biracial heritage the call to action sex usually inspires. He wants to intervene in what he sees, not only to observe and interpret it.

This sense of obligation exemplifies the larger difficulty Toomer figures in different ways throughout *Cane*. Toomer's artists feel a profound sense of responsibility to the forms of life they encounter. Across a variety of social and regional settings, the book's artists and poets confront conditions, events, and individuals that seem to demand from them some direct and measurable response, some action that will help or transform others. Often, the need to act is motivated by a kind of sensuous love close to but distinct from sexual desire. The narrator of "Avey," who also shares certain biographical experiences with Toomer, wants to liberate a woman he loves from a life of indolence and misspent passion. Dan Moore, the protagonist of "Box Seat," wants his lover Muriel to abandon her bourgeois values and admit she cares for him. To do so, Dan believes she would have to radically change her values, behaviors, and feelings. Similar desires to transform a beloved motivate characters in "Bona and Paul" and "Theater." Each of these narratives plays out a possible response to the question poet Ralph Kabnis asks in *Cane*'s concluding drama: "Cant something be done?"

When the artist's aim is to intervene in the world he observes, however, he confronts great challenges. The artist in "Fern," for instance, is no better off than others who ask what can



be done for her. The narrator confronts the same basic aporia other men face as he tries to imagine how he might help her:

Something I must do for her. There was myself. What could I do for her? Talk, of course.  
Push back the fringe of pines upon new horizons. To what purpose? and what for? Her?  
Myself? (20).

Because the artist understands Fern's indifference to love is rooted in a general ontological condition, he finds it even more difficult than others do to conceive a course of action to take. He will not offer Fern candy or the deed to a house. Instead, he might "talk" to her, thereby opening her limited local view of her own situation ("push back the fringe of pines") to "new horizons." A "horizon" marks the boundary of perceptible physical space, beyond which we cannot see (OED "horizon" 1a). As a figure, it indicates the "boundary or limit of any 'circle' or 'sphere' of view, thought, action, etc.," of "one's mental vision or perception" and "one's knowledge, experience, or interest" (OED "horizon" 2b). Through "talk," the narrator thinks he might expand Fern's figurative ability to see and feel, to be interested. He has already attributed her predicament to "a thing like love," so the new horizons of perception he hopes to reveal to her with his words are erotic. The artist is not certain his attempts will do any good, however, nor can he be sure of his own motives: "To what purpose" would he talk with Fern? For "her?" For "myself?" Searching and self-critical, he doubts both his powers and his intentions.

Toomer's narrator thus comes to a particularly modern impasse. Unable to find a secure position from which he can meet his obligation to act, he faces the crises of epistemology and authority that define modernity for many writers.<sup>245</sup> He does not know what to do or why he might do anything at all, and no stable center of authority is available to help him decide. The

narrator comes to this impasse as he reflects upon his powers as an artist, and he extends his questions to others in the passage that follows:

I ask you, friend (it makes no difference whether you sit in the Pullman or the Jim Crow as the train crosses her road), what thoughts would come to you—that is, after you’d finished with the thoughts that leap into men’s minds at the sight of a pretty woman who will not deny them; what thoughts would come to you, had you seen her in a quick flash, keen and intuitively, as she sat there on her porch when your train thundered by? Would you have got off at the next station and come back for her to take her where? [...] Your thoughts can help me, and I would like to know. Something I would do for her (20).

As Toomer addresses readers directly, the question of what to do for Fern becomes urgent, immediate, and general, something all men must consider. Toomer encourages others to see her as the artist does, “in a quick flash, keen and intuitively.” He differentiates this way of perceiving Fern from the attitude he assumes unites heterosexual men, regardless of race. The artist urges readers to set aside “the thoughts that leap into men’s minds at the sight of a pretty woman who will not deny them” and to contemplate Fern without “selfishness.” He calls others to abandon familiar habits of interest and imagine new relationships between men and women. In this way, Toomer’s artist attempts to influence readers as he imagines he might influence Fern. Just as he hopes his “talk” might open to Fern “new horizons” for love beyond the “fringe of pines,” he hopes readers will move beyond sensual desire and address Fern instead out of a different and as yet undisclosed kind of love. An invitation to reimagine erotic relationships, his appeal suggests the task is necessarily collective. “Your thoughts can help me,” he says, “and I would like to know.” In the absence of authority, deciding how to live and what to do become questions all

answer together. When Toomer asks readers what can be done for Fern, he asks more broadly what art can do for us in the face of our frustrated desires and loves.

In order consider such questions, Toomer proposes, readers must regard Fern from the artist's "keen and intuitive" point of view. The story grounds this perspective in a kind of love Toomer sharpens against two other forms of *eros*. On one hand, the artist's love differs from the passions that animate sex, which arouse Fern's lovers and touch readers Toomer asks to imagine her. The difference between sexual desire and art's sensuous pleasures is fundamental to Toomer's conception of art, and I return to the distinction below as Toomer elaborates it in "Avey" and elsewhere. On the other hand, it differs from the transcendental desires that carry Fern away from the world of sense at the end of the vignette. When the narrator finally talks with Fern, he walks with her into a cane field at dusk. There, a kind of vision grips her:

Her eyes, unusually weird and open, held me. Held God. He flowed in as I've seen the countryside flow in. Seen men. [...] She sprang up. Rushed some distance from me. Fell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying. Her body was tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her. It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Jesus Christ. And then she sang, brokenly. A Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice. [...] I rushed to her. She fainted in my arms.

It is possible to read Fern's inspired episode as the fulfillment of the artist's desire to "push back the fringe of pines" and open to Fern "new horizons" of love. In a sense, Fern's horizons expand in this moment beyond the most extreme limits of human consciousness. The divine enters her body as men do, as the countryside does, and she sings a plaintive song that seems to issue from whatever her "tortured" body cannot "let out." "Something" unidentifiable breaks through her

indifference, which nothing in the world can disturb. She does not seem in this moment a woman fulfilled, but rather a woman finally possessed by a need so acute she must act to relieve it. She releases through song “something” that overpowers her body as sensual desire overpowers others.

Nothing the narrator does or says provokes these events, however. Whatever new horizons open to Fern in this moment of divine possession, the narrator’s talk does not reveal them. He barely speaks to Fern, and when he does, she barely responds. No discernible event engenders her outburst, to which the artist seems an incidental and helpless witness. He leaves town shortly after she faints with him in the cane field:

From the train window I saw her on her porch, head tilted a little forward where the nail was, eyes vaguely focused on the sunset. Saw her face flow into them, the countryside and something I call God, flowing into them ... Nothing ever really happened. Nothing ever came to Fern, not even I. Something I would do for her. Some fine unnamed thing ... And, friend, you? She is still living.

The artist repeats his refrain, “Something I would do for her.” Fern’s experience of divine love neither offers Fern the kind of satisfaction she seems to need nor fulfills the narrator’s sense of obligation. Divine inspiration does not remedy Fern’s disinterest in life. She remains indifferent as ever, sitting on her porch as she did before. Although some ambiguous force the narrator “call[s] God” flows through her, transcendental passion adds up to “nothing” for her in the end. What Fern needs remains to the last “unnamed.” The artist repeats his appeal to readers, who are not to accept that “God” is the answer to the crisis of action Fern incites. She “is still living,” he says, extending into a future only her death can remit the obligation she represents. God, the narrator’s concluding reflections suggest, cannot help those who are alive. The story establishes

the artist's critical view of Georgia's transcendental traditions, rooted in institutions of slavery, which Toomer revisits and expands in "Kabnis." Here, as in the play, Toomer suggests that transcendental experiences and explanations no longer give adequate meaning to life in the South. The artist's question—what to do for a woman unsatisfied by all imaginable erotic relationships—remains at the end of the vignette as pressing as ever.

Toomer returns to it in "Avey," the title character of which is in many ways Fern's opposite. The narrator of the vignette, who shares some of Toomer's biography, meets on the streets of Washington a woman he loved years ago. A teacher who lost her post over an affair, Avey now wears an expensive dress and escorts a client. The narrator takes her away to walk at Soldier's Home, where he speaks passionately:

I traced my development from the early days up to the present time, the phase in which I could understand her. I described her own nature and temperament. Told how they needed a larger life for their expression. How incapable Washington was of understanding that need.<sup>246</sup>

As does the narrator in "Fern," Toomer's artist figure wants to intervene in Avey's life by talking with her, and Toomer again grounds this attempt in the artist's distinct way of perceiving and interpreting the desires of others. The narrator begins by tracing his own "development," the progression by which he has come to be the kind of observer who can understand her. He recognizes, as he believes neither Avey herself nor others can, the nature of Avey's needs, which cannot be satisfied by the world in which she lives. Common opinion in Washington, the narrator tells us, considers Avey "no better than a whore."<sup>247</sup> The bourgeois community to which they both belong is "incapable" of "understanding" that she needs a "larger life" to "express" her "nature and temperament." Because Avey pursues sensual pleasures, the artist suggests she too is

incapable of understanding herself. He asks her to perceive herself anew and to reconsider the activities from which she seeks gratification.

Avey's lover encourages her to prepare for an emergent "art" that will one day satisfy her as he insists sex cannot:

I pointed out that in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed into paths that dissipated them. I talked, beautifully, I thought, about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. I asked her to hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that day. I recited some of my own things to her. I sang, with a strange quiver in my voice, a promise-song.<sup>248</sup>

For the artist, contemporary US life offers no "proper channels" for vital, creative activity and the "emotions" that animate it. Toomer figures "emotions" here as fluid, material substances, like water, which we "channel" or direct by way of our activities. Whatever "art" or activity will carve the "proper channels" the artist imagines, he indicates it does not yet exist in US life. Toomer gestures toward, but discloses little about, the specific nature and function of the "art that" will someday "be born." That it will "open the way for women the likes" of Avey suggests it is an activity akin to sex, which also creates life and excites the senses and passions. The "way" art will "open" to her also remains ambiguous. To prepare to meet it, Avey can only "hope" and "build up an inner life." The artist advises her to turn away from the activities that "dissipate" her and concentrate her energies within. Poetry and music, Toomer indicates, play a fundamental role in this internal development. The narrator sings to her and recites his poems, as if sharing the sounds and rhythms that prepare the way for change.

The view of art Avey's lover articulates here differs from the vision Toomer offers in "Fern." Some of its elements correspond with the romantic image of the artist Toomer

sometimes shared with both the “Young Americans” and with Alain Locke, his friend and correspondent in the early 1920s. Locke’s *New Negro* anthology, to which Toomer was an unwilling contributor, celebrates a new generation of African American writers who would transform the spirit of the race from within. The *New Negro* declares its titular figure can achieve through the arts a newfound “spiritual emancipation” and “self-understanding” distinct from the limited legal and political liberties gained after the Civil War.<sup>249</sup> African Americans, Locke argues, need to pursue along with the “objectives” of an “outer life,” defined by the “ideals of American institutions and democracy,” a set of “inner objectives.”<sup>250</sup> Artists in particular contribute to this aim, because their “pure art” differs from the sentimental and moralizing forms African American writers addressed in the past to particular political goals. The separation of the artist from the quotidian and the public spheres paradoxically imbues, for Locke as for many romantics, the literary and the aesthetic with a transformative social power greater than that of any polemical or moralizing text.<sup>251</sup> When young African American artists “seek and find art’s intrinsic values and satisfactions,”<sup>252</sup> Locke writes, they offer “arresting visions and vibrant prophecies; forecasting in the mirror of art what we must see and recognize in the streets of reality tomorrow.”<sup>253</sup> Locke viewed Toomer as one of the prophets of this future, and the narrator of “Avey” clearly conceives of himself in these terms. He “foretells” a future art and imagines his songs can help Avey cultivate an “inner life” foreclosed by the world she knows.

“Avey” concludes, however, with a passage that undercuts the narrator’s romantic vision. As he sings, the artist begins to “wonder why [Avey’s] hand had not once returned a single pressure”:

My old-time feeling about her laziness came back. I spoke sharply. [...] An immediate and urgent passion swept over me. Then I looked at Avey. Her heavy eyes were closed.

Her breathing was as faint and regular as a child's in slumber. My passion died. I was afraid to move lest I disturb her. Hours and hours, I guess it was, she lay there.<sup>254</sup>

Avey is too exhausted by her present to listen to the artist prophecy the art of the future. When he speaks "sharply" to her, upset that she hears none of his beautiful talk, he speaks as an interested lover, enflamed by passion. He doubts his own interpretation of Avey's "nature and temperament," and thinks her lazy again as he did before his "development" allowed him to understand her. Just as quickly, however, his "passion" dies, and he is forced to consider Avey anew. This rapid progression of feeling, and the changing interpretations of character and behavior it spurs, calls into question again the artist's ability to perceive and interpret what he observes and cares for. The same crisis of action that drives the artist in "Fern" to appeal to readers returns here, and the artist can do nothing but watch Avey sleep on the grass. In this moment, the artist's compassion for another, who cannot fulfill for him the role of attentive student, takes the place of the romantic art he declaimed in his oration. The vignette concludes by endorsing a kind of love that is neither sexual nor romantic. Avey's lover cares for her instead without self-interest, borrowing a blanket from a neighbor and sitting with her until dawn.

The erotic oppositions that structure "Fern" and "Avey" correspond to the set of oppositions that, for Toomer and the group of "Young Americans" he knew and read, defined US life in the early twentieth century. In his critical writings and his correspondence, Toomer uses the language Van Wyck Brooks develops in the teens and twenties to name the "two main currents in the American mind"<sup>255</sup>: "the current of Transcendentalism, originating in the piety of the Puritans"<sup>256</sup> and "the current of catchpenny opportunism"<sup>257</sup> Brooks associates with "the pioneering instinct of economic self-assertion."<sup>258</sup> "Fern" and "Avey" position the artist between an impotent, unearthly love that corresponds to the "devitalizing puritanism" Toomer elsewhere



names and an indulgent, venal carnality that corresponds to the pioneer's selfish and acquisitive materialism. Toomer thus expresses throughout *Cane* the hope that the artist, through love, can strike a middle ground between these two categories, effecting a kind of Hegelian synthesis between what he, Frank, Munson, and many others writing at the time called the "ideal" and the "real."

Toomer owes some elements of his erotic vision of art to Waldo Frank, whose *Our America* inspired him to write more than any other book. In Frank's nationalist, idealist polemic, he sources art's dialectical function in love. The artist in America, he says, must become the kind of figure Puritan and pioneer culture "has immemorially denied: the dreamer, the lover."<sup>259</sup> He must "generate" the "energy which is love of life. For that energy, to whatever form the mind consign it, is religious. Its act is creation." Charged with this creative, religious love, Frank's artists craft material forms and thereby elevate life to a level of spiritual reality more real than the real. In so doing, they fulfill America's exceptional promise:

For us of the younger generation, America is a promise and a dream. Not a dream of infancy in which the real does not enter. The dream rather of young manhood to which the real *must* conform.[...] We believe we are the true realists; we who insist that in the essence of all reality lies the Ideal.<sup>260</sup>

Frank's vision of reality, which he shares with a wide range of contemporaries—among them Oswald Spengler, Alain Locke, and Benedetto Croce—echoes and simplifies Hegel's transcendental philosophy of history. The artist embodies something akin to Hegelian *Geist*, which he gives material form in his work, thereby driving human history.<sup>261</sup> The "real," the unchanging "essence" of which the idealist alone understands, "*must* conform" to his virile, masculine dreams. Idealism brings down to earth the transcendental reality the Platonic tradition

locates above and outside finite things, and thus grants men great creative power.<sup>262</sup> Even located in the physical world, however, the idealist vision of spirit Frank endorses remains immune to the ravages of time and space as its triumphs take form in the soul of the individual and in the nation. Although it pretends to be historical, Frank's idealism preserves an ahistorical vision of human being and a transcendental vision of reality. The loving American artist Frank imagines expresses and impels a universal spirit of human progress.

As I have been arguing, Toomer believes, as Frank does, that a distinct kind of "love" is fundamental to the artist's work, and he shares with Frank the insight that this love differs from other modes of erotic investment and interest conventional across forms of life in the US. In contrast to Frank, however, Toomer is unwilling to fix the nature and power of this love. The narrator of "Fern," for instance, does not offer an "ideal" position or a positive vision he presents to readers as truth, a fact Gorham Munson complained about in a letter to Toomer.<sup>263</sup> Nor does Toomer bind his care for the realities he encounters to nationalist aims. Instead, the narrator of "Fern" speaks out of, and opens to readers, a position of radical instability that questions the horizon of any action, any attitude of love. The narrator of "Fern" senses his care for the world, which is grounded neither in transcendental nor in purely sensuous passions, holds out to others an ambiguous promise, but he does not finally articulate its nature or the means by which it can transform the "real." "Fern" and Toomer's other narratives of failure demonstrate that Frank's idealist imperative is a fiction. Toomer understands the "real"—to which such incomprehensible subjects as Fern belong—will not simply "conform" to the artist's will and imagination.

Toomer's stories thus register in lyrical form the limits of idealism Kenneth Burke<sup>264</sup> articulates in a review of Frank's novels, "The Consequences of Idealism." Although Toomer read and refuted Burke's remarks in a letter to Frank, he seems in *Cane* to acknowledge the very

limitations Burke emphasizes: “For idealism, with its strong emphasis on the creative will, brings about an abnormal, almost superstitious, emphasis on the value of the individual, the national entity, man triumphant.”<sup>265</sup> In “Fern,” the artist reaches out to others, emphasizing the collective nature of the task of thinking and feeling. Burke also understood as complementary the “cataclysm of the late war” and the “individualistic universes of the modern artist, each carefully cherishing his own bias like a precious gem, each *willing* his own world.”<sup>266</sup> Idealism, for Burke, “is the philosophic parallel of those economic, artistic, and political movements which have led us to the impasse of modern civilization.”<sup>267</sup> Because idealism does not understand the imagination’s limitations with respect to reality, it leads more readily to fascism and totalitarianism—on the horizon of Burke’s review in the early 1920s—than to “love of life.” *Cane* registers these dangers and inadequacies in its first section as it lingers with care over the forms of life that exceed the artist’s will to power. In “Kabnis,” Toomer foregrounds the crises of action and knowledge the earlier stories touch and treats more explicitly the difficulties the poet who would transform the world out of love confronts.

### **“Kabnis” and the Nightmare of Language**

Toomer opens “Kabnis” with a scene of intense poetic longing. We meet protagonist Ralph Kabnis sweating and agitated in a Georgia cabin so far from the northern cities he knows Washington seems a “lifetime” away and New York an impossible “fiction.” Kabnis listens in bed to the “night winds” sing like “vagrant poets” through the “lips” of his cracked walls. Their song, which carries through and punctuates the rest of the drama, introduces into the rhythms and refrains of familiar spirituals history’s stunning violence:

White-man’s land,  
Niggers, sing.

Burn, bear black children

Till poor rivers bring

Rest, and sweet glory

In Camp Ground.<sup>268</sup>

The chorus names the particular nature of the South's violence traditional spirituals did not and could not ("bear black children" burn in a "white-man's land"). It also preserves the narrative common to the genre that inspires it.<sup>269</sup> The winds rehearse a story of earthly trials sustained in life and redeemed in relief attainable only after death in a transcendental beyond.

Kabnis' disquiet grows against the whispered persistence of this refrain, given voice by the air he breathes and the structure that houses him. It stirs in him the desire to sing himself, to "develop...in words" the powerful and inarticulate passions the South arouses. When we first hear Kabnis speak—or perhaps we overhear his thoughts—he proclaims to a beloved muse a bard's longing he extends in vivid and difficult language:

Near me. Now. Whoever you are, my warm and glowing sweetheart, do not think that the face that rests beside you is the real Kabnis. Ralph Kabnis is a dream. And dreams are faces with large eyes and weak chins and broad brows that get smashed by the fists of square faces. The body of the world is bull-necked. A dream is a soft face that fits uncertainly upon it...God, if I could develop that in words. Give what I know a bull-neck and a heaving body, all would go well with me, wouldn't it, sweetheart? If I could feel that I came to the South to face it. If I, the dream (not what is weak and afraid in me) could become the face of the South. How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul. Soul. Soul hell. There ain't no such thing.<sup>270</sup>

Kabnis' apostrophe elaborates by figure the function of the poet for the world in which he sings. In the South Kabnis visits to teach young African American girls, the "soul" no longer unifies and defines human being. Kabnis wishes to be a dream face that fits atop the "bull-necked" body of such a world. At the same time, he wants to *give* "a bull-neck and a heaving body" to what he "knows," an act accomplished by language. This shifting image establishes equivalences between dreams and faces on the one hand—the projections of the imagination—and the world and the body—material reality—on the other. The corporeal figure Kabnis develops this way poses a complicated relationship between these equivalences. The face, or the poet's imagination, does not guide or direct the body of the world to which it is attached. Neither does the body claim priority as a given, unchangeable mass. Instead, imagination and world stand in a mutually constituting connection that refuses priority or principal to either. Kabnis aspires to become the face and voice of a world he encounters. If he can, the shape and nature of that world, its heaving body, will change. He imagines rhythmic language—"words," "songs"—to be the medium through which he would accomplish this, by which he would fit the dreams he projects atop a world those dreams create. This vision of poetic activity, which eludes Kabnis as he strives to conceive and enact its power, the Southern scene that surrounds him with old songs of transcendence seems desperately to need. He wants a poetry that can take the place of songs that promise the living redemption for their suffering only in death. He wants poetry with the creative power to change life on earth.

"Kabnis" stages with urgency the modern crisis Toomer builds in the other vignettes, and it makes poetry in particular, rather than art in general, its special subject. In a world without divine authority, without the vision of human transcendence the "soul" promises, and without recourse to the ideal truths the Platonic and Christian traditions provide, the poet must make

sense of a reality in which human finitude is certain and no metaphysical absolutes exist to guide human action. We meet Kabnis in the throes of a crisis these conditions define. Disturbed by the outmoded songs the winds whisper and by the ineradicable fear he feels as a black man in a dangerous land, Kabnis rushes from his room. He falls to his knees, seized by terror and longing. He cannot reconcile the “radiant beauty of the night” with the “ugly” conditions of life he experiences as “Earth’s child.” He is confined to poor “quarters,” beholden to the moralizing conservative who employs him, and threatened by the violence of whites who can’t “juggle justice and a nigger.” Kabnis appeals to God one moment and denies his existence the next.

Kneeling amidst “[h]og pens and chicken yards,” “[d]irty red mud,” and a “[s]tinking outhouse,” Kabnis struggles to understand his surroundings and his own position:

There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and...tortures me.[...] Whats beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you? God, he doesnt exist, but nevertheless He is ugly. [...] This loneliness, dumbness, awful, intangible oppression is enough to drive a man insane. Miles from nowhere. A speck on a Georgia hillside. Jesus, can you imagine it— an atom of dust in agony on a hillside? That’s a spectacle for you. [...] The large frame house, squatting on brick pillars, where the principal of the school, his wife, and the boarding girls sleep, seems a curious shadow of his mind. He tries, but cannot convince himself of its reality.<sup>271</sup>

Toomer follows Kabnis as he talks to himself, shifting from the first person to free indirect discourse. He observes Kabnis observing the Georgia night, tracing along the scene’s contours the conclusions Kabnis draws and the emotions he suffers. We follow a modern consciousness as Kabnis attempts to orient himself in a world at once beautiful and ugly. The awful “oppression” that grows out of this contradiction Kabnis associates with the social and political limitations and

bodily perils he faces as an African American in the Jim Crow South, but he also ascribes his disquiet to a more fundamental condition. His view of his situation is cosmic, large. He is a speck in agony on a hillside, and he would laugh at the spectacle he makes if he did not feel his state so intensely. What oppresses him is “intangible,” brought about by an inability to either affirm or deny God and an associated inability to understand and respond to the “reality” he experiences. The material things he perceives seem a “curious shadow of his mind,” as if the pull of imagination and emotion that overwhelms him in this moment threatens his ability to recognize reality.

Over the course of the narrative that follows this scene, Kabnis tries to resolve the tension between a “reality” that confounds and pressures him and his own perceptions, desires, and imaginings. He wants to arrive at some course of action or way of speaking and writing that will allow him to transform and influence a reality without divine intervention, eternal truth, or the redemptive comforts of “Camp Ground.” The brutal race violence endemic to the South, ever-present after Kabnis’ local friends tell him stories of lynching, exacerbates this desire and makes the need to effect change urgent. Kabnis chooses literary writing as the transformative activity to which he will apply himself, privileging its practices and promises over those of the other black intellectuals he befriends in Georgia. The South needs a black poet, the story suggests, to accomplish what a preacher, a craftsman, and a schoolmaster cannot.

“Kabnis” differs from Toomer’s other pieces in a several important ways. “Kabnis” places the poet among men, positioning him within a community of black and biracial intellectuals who pose with Kabnis the question “Cant something be done?” The passionate love for women and the will to direct their erotic energies that carries through Toomer’s other prose pieces is modified as the poet turns his attention to a world of male interlocutors. “Ralph

Kabnis,” says Toomer’s poet, speaking of himself in the third person, does not “ge[t] satisfied that way.”<sup>272</sup> Among men, erotic energy must be invested explicitly in activities that “build worlds,” as Toomer puts it in an autobiography, and Toomer uses a language of “love” only when Kabnis speaks to his “sweetheart” muse or when sympathetic women want to “mother” him. The artist’s love does not disappear, but he directs it in different ways toward different ends in Toomer’s concluding drama. For one, he directs it toward the South, which Kabnis addresses as a land, a place, and a broad community of human others. The men who protect Kabnis from immediate danger and debate with him the problems of black life are also objects of his love within this larger frame. Kabnis directs toward these different individuals and elements the transformative desires and creative energies Toomer’s other artist figures direct toward the women they love.

As critics have observed, “Kabnis” “resist[s] the solution of the mere will to ‘creation’”<sup>273</sup> that sustains Toomer in some of his other writings and Frank in *Our America*. “Kabnis” makes clear the poet cannot raze an entrenched order of systemic injustice out of his loving desires. The poet searches for a new conception of “soul”—“I know what that is; th preachers dont,”<sup>274</sup> Kabnis says—adequate to the “violent external pressure”<sup>275</sup> of Southern life. History, reality, and the limits of the poet’s will, which come together in language, the very material Kabnis tries to master, impede this idealist project. Kabnis, fighting to find the right words, finds that no vision of earthly activity sourced in an essentialist view of human life and a transcendental view of history can lead to the forms of liberty he wants for himself and others. Toomer’s Southern intellectuals face a brutal regime of state and economic power that denies them agency twice over. They confront both the pressures Toomer writes elsewhere “arise from the condition of being a black man in a white world”<sup>276</sup> and the constraints he associates after



Frank and Van Wyck Brooks with Puritan-pioneer ideologies. Although “Kabnis” concludes with a note of hope, the story suggests none of its “professors” can meet and transform with their activities the horrors of their world.

“Kabnis” is Toomer’s most formally complex piece, not least because it gives voice to a larger cast of characters than any other. Toomer sharpens the intellectual investments and functions of his figures against each other. In Sempter, Georgia, Kabnis meets Halsey (the craftsman), Layman (the preacher), Hanby (the schoolmaster), Lewis (another Northern intellectual), and Father John, the ancient grandfather Halsey houses in the basement of his woodshop. Father John was once a “slave boy some Christian mistress taught to read the Bible,”<sup>277</sup> and his disappointing oracular pronouncement concludes the drama. Over the course of six sections, these men explore the possibilities and limitations of their passions and activities against a background of white violence epitomized by the brutal murder of Mame Lamkins and her unborn child.

The question of how to perceive, consider, and act in response to problems of this kind anchors the play, as the significant conversation about white violence in section two indicates:

Layman: [...] Seen um shoot an cut a man t pieces who had died the night befo. Yassur. An they didn’t stop when they found out he was dead—jes went on ahackin away at him anyway.

Kabnis: What did you do? What did you say to them, Professor?

Layman: Them th things you neither does a thing or talks about if y want t stay around this away, Professor.

Halsey: Listen t what he’s telling y, Kabnis. May come in handy some day.

Kabnis: Cant something be done? But of course not. This preacher-ridden race. Pray and shout. Theyre in the preacher’s hands. Thats what it is. And the preacher’s hands are in the white man’s pockets.

Halsey: Present company always excepted.

Kabnis: The Professor knows I wasnt referring to him.

Layman: Preacher’s a preacher anywheres you turn. No use exceptin.

Kabnis: Well, of course, if you look at it that way. I didnt mean—But cant something be done?<sup>278</sup>

What can be “done,” Layman says, is “jes like Sam Ramon done it.” Facing an angry white mob who has just killed two others, Sam Ramon begs to “die” in his “own way,” and “he up an jumps int th stream.”<sup>279</sup>

Because Layman and Halsey belong to Sempter, they understand as Kabnis can only begin to the brutal conditions that limit the human will there. Layman’s joke about Sam Ramon is dead serious, and it establishes the horizon of agency Layman and Halsey know in the South. A black man can choose to kill himself or to be killed by others. To live in Georgia, to “stay around this away,” one must understand that death figures the only space of will and desire the South’s logic opens to African Americans. No utterance or action—nothing one “does a thing or talks about”—can change a regime founded upon the denial of human agency in the world. The image of the black body, shot and “cut t pieces” even after death, emphasizes how virulent and intractable is this logic. Thus, for the preacher and his congregation, death liberates the will from the seemingly insurmountable restrictions life imposes upon Southern blacks and directs all hope for liberty, love, and desire beyond life on earth. Unfamiliar as Kabnis is with Southern life, he brings to Georgia a necessary capacity to hope Layman and Halsey lack. Kabnis understands that

transcendental logic serves white interests by foreclosing the world as a site of action for blacks and rejects the silent inaction Layman and Halsey insist is the only way to survive. He asks again *Cane's* central question: "But cant something be done?"

Toomer develops Halsey, Layman, and Kabnis together, and the play evaluates the activity to which each devotes himself in terms of what each can "do" for the South. Halsey devotes his passion to material endeavors, Layman to spiritual work, and Kabnis dreams of synthesizing the two orders through poetry. Halsey, who tries to mentor Kabnis in his woodshop, is "an artist in [his] own way," but his province is limited to inanimate matter. He forms and shapes the various tools and machines commerce requires. Halsey's physical labor is the counterpart to Layman's spiritual labor, which works upon the soul. To Kabnis (and to Toomer), neither activity can transform life in Georgia because each contributes to the dominant state and economic interests that limit black agency. Layman benefits whites when he turns the passions of his congregants away from the world. Halsey participates in the same system when he trades labor with whites, adopts toward them a servile demeanor, and repairs their machines. Neither integrates, as Kabnis wants to, spirit and matter.

Although Kabnis senses change in Sempter calls for some third category of activity neither of his friends practice, Toomer emphasizes throughout the drama that this Hegelian synthesis of opposites, so important to the romantic tradition of philosophy and art, is easy to imagine and almost impossible to perform through identifiable individual actions. Toomer use of the word "soul" throughout "Kabnis" indicates a primary element of this difficulty. Kabnis believes poetry can work upon a category of "spirit" he differentiates from the Christian soul preachers want to stir, but he struggles throughout to conceive its nature. Toomer invokes the

word “soul” in a number of different contexts for a number of different reasons, playing over an unstable and searching field of meaning modernity throws into crisis.

Kabnis first invokes “soul” in his opening monologue, when he longs to become “the face of the South”: “how my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul. Soul. Soul hell. There aint no such thing.”<sup>280</sup> The lines come at the end of the extended, shifting metaphor by which Kabnis tries to elaborate his vision of imaginative activity. The “soul” here belongs, not to an individual, but to the South—it is the broad sense of life that binds place and people. The poet’s songs are not *what* the “soul” utters, and the poet’s mouth is not the mouth of the South. Rather, his songs are “lips,” the organ that enables the South’s “soul” to speak. The striking image renders material the music of language and its effects on a collective. Songs—words, rhythm, sound—become a mediating, material organ that gives expression to the ineffable sense of life proper to a place (“soul”). The passage, in which Kabnis works to explain how his “dreams” can become the “heaving body” of the world, seeks a figure by which the poet can imagine the worldly, material function of language.

As soon as Kabnis extends this possible vision of poetic song, however, he withdraws it by dismissing the key term upon which it hangs. “There aint no such thing” as a soul, he says. Toomer places the word “soul” under tremendous pressure throughout the drama, as the reversals upon which this moment depends indicate. The “soul” of the South Kabnis invokes aligns with the first sense the OED lists today: “an essential principle or attribute of life,” applied specifically to “the essential, fundamental, animating, or vital part or feature of” a “material thing, object or place.”<sup>281</sup> When Toomer connects the South’s soul with “song,” especially in the context of African American life, he also prefigures and participates in the Jazz-derived etymology the OED dates as codified by 1946: “the emotional or spiritual quality of African

American life and culture, esp. as manifested in music.”<sup>282</sup> Its proximity in the text to the crisis moment in which Kabnis simultaneously invokes, denies, praises, and curses his “maker” also suggests Kabnis plays over a third signification for “soul.” This is the second sense the OED lists, one of the oldest—“the immaterial part of a person; a person's spirit,” particularly that part “in Christianity and other religions” “considered in relation to God and religious or moral precepts”<sup>283</sup> or “regarded as surviving a person's physical death and believed to be capable of happiness or misery depending on divine judgment.”<sup>284</sup> Kabnis wants for the poet the larger erotic power for which a generalized animating principle or “soul” provides the object of transformation. Because he wants to produce change on earth, however, he must distinguish the poet’s object from the immortal “soul” such Christians as Layman celebrate. The difficulty weighs upon Kabnis’ inspired trope, and he rescinds his desire to make his songs the “lips” of the South’s soul. A vision of poetic activity that wants to become material and worldly, his self-effacing “Soul hell” signals, cannot begin with an essence tied to the transcendental tradition he finds he needs to abandon.

In these lines, the poet does not find words that will appropriately figure his own function and nature. He cannot find the right words because the “soul” does not exist, and he therefore cannot identify the substance or force his words are supposed to transform with their musical, material qualities. When Kabnis denies the “soul,” then, he affirms his need for a different conception of what his words will take as their object and of how they will alter life. This different conception begins with sound and rhythm and somehow moves to broad collective effects. Because “Kabnis” foregrounds the role of language in this process, Toomer can explore with increased precision the problems his other artist figures confront in the earlier vignettes. Both Dan Moore and the narrator of “Avey” seem to want to bypass the labors of language, of

form, craft, and music, to work directly upon the spiritual essence they see in their lovers. When Kabnis makes his struggle to find the right words essential to his ambitions, he can consider his own activity in worldly, material terms.

Kabnis is attentive to the multiple significations of his own words, revising and correcting his tropes, songs, and statements as he speaks. Everything seems at stake for him as he does so. His speech also changes as his stay in the South lengthens. It comes to resemble more closely Halsey's and Layman's than it does an educated Northerner's. This self-reflexive attention to the materiality of words is foundational to the questions Kabnis poses in his room and pursues as the drama unfolds. If there is no such thing as "soul," what exactly does language transform? How does it "build a world," as Toomer wanted to? Toomer's attention in "Kabnis" to the powers and limits of language further distinguishes *Cane* from the idealist works Toomer admired. Kenneth Burke<sup>285</sup> and Lewis Mumford both castigated Waldo Frank for subsuming the writer's facility with his material—language—to his idealist aims. Mumford writes, "If Mr. Frank would listen for his language as patiently as he listens for the sound of some external event falling into the deep well of the human soul, there would be a closer relation between the behavior of his characters and the reactions they are supposed to set up in his readers."<sup>286</sup> The poet who takes men, rather than words, as his material, these comments suggest, abjures the only means he has to touch the human readers he would influence. In "Kabnis," Toomer recognizes this explicitly.

Kabnis settles nothing by the end of his opening monologue, and so the difficulties he faces there return with a vengeance later in the drama. In one of Toomer's most striking passages, Kabnis tries to explain his desire and purpose to the late-night revelers assembled in Halsey's basement—"good-time" girls Cora and Stella, friends Halsey and Lewis, and silent

witness Father John. “Been shapin words t fit m soul,” Kabnis proclaims, addressing Halsey especially. “Never told y that before, did I? Thought I couldn’t talk. I’ll tell y. I’ve been shapin words; ah, but sometimes theyre beautiful an golden an have a taste that makes them fine t roll over with y tongue. Your tongue aint fit f nothin but t roll an lick hog meat.”<sup>287</sup>

Kabnis invokes the “soul” again as the powerful site or substance of language’s effects. Now, the “soul” is the poet’s, and he shapes “words t fit” it. This vision of creative poetic labor differs from the one Kabnis offers in the opening monologue. There, he wants to “develop” “words” and “songs” that will become the “lips” of the South’s “soul.” Now he wants words that will “fit” his own “soul.” The description is not expressionist—his soul will not speak through his words. “Fit” and “shape” borrow instead a set of material connotations from Halsey’s work, from the labor of carving, cutting, and modeling. Toomer emphasizes again language’s material properties, and the “soul” takes on a similarly substantial character. If the poet is to shape words to “fit” it, it too has a shape, a form.

Kabnis thus reinstates the “soul” he dismisses early in the piece, but a series of tensions and difficulties continue to put pressure on this trope. First, Kabnis’ oration is comic. He delivers it drunk in a basement, wearing an outrageous robe and declaiming wildly as his friends try to subdue him. He rebukes and punishes his friend Halsey to inflate his own powers. “[Y]oure all right f choppin things from blocks of wood,”<sup>288</sup> he says, but Halsey is not fit for Kabnis’s beautiful words. The scene registers again the distance Toomer, Frank, and others felt between the democratic masses and the American artist, but its levity modifies how we perceive this distance. At the same moment Kabnis reclaims the “soul” as the poet’s province, he frustrates his own aims—to “lift” and empower others. If he wants to inspire such Southern men as Halsey

with the sound and rhythm of his words, here he shames the craftsman and excludes him from an elevated and refined realm of taste.

Irony, which Toomer does not rely upon in “Box Seat,” “Avey,” or “Bona and Paul,” calls into question Kabnis’s self-aggrandizing pronouncements. In a review Toomer read,<sup>289</sup> Kenneth Burke writes of Waldo Frank what is also true of some of Toomer’s work: “the author’s intensity is too direct, lies too far beyond the subterfuge. Mr. Frank is a serious Buddha, which is a dangerous thing to be in an age which could produce Ulysses. If we have to choose between an artist who is passionless and clever, and an artist who is tumultuous and non-clever, it is a sad pair to choose from, but the former would be nearer to art.”<sup>290</sup> “Kabnis” is Toomer’s finest achievement in part because it deepens its serious concerns with elements of irony and humor. The play’s style renders self-reflexive Toomer’s vital consideration of poetic activity.

Kabnis continues his oration on his “soul” and his words, introducing a third “form” or “mold” that intercedes between these two material and spiritual orders and frustrates his desire to sing for the South:

Cant keep a good man down. Those words I was tellin y about, they wont fit int th mold thats branded on m soul. Rhyme, y see? Poet, too. Bad rhyme. Bad poet. Somethin else youve learned tnight. Lewis dont know it all, an I'm atellin y. Ugh. Th form thats burned int my soul is some twisted awful thing that crept in from a dream, a godam nightmare, an wont stay still unless I feed it. An it lives on words. Not beautiful words. God Almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words. Layman was feedin it back there that day you thought I ran out fearin things. White folks feed it cause their looks are words. Niggers, black niggers feed it cause theyre evil an their looks are words. Yallar niggers feed it. This whole damn bloated purple country feeds it cause its goin down t



hell in a holy avalanche of words. I want t feed th soul--I know what that is; th preachers dont-- but I've got t feed it. I wish t God some lynchin white man ud stick his knife through it an pin it to a tree. An pin it to a tree.

The “form” that stands between Kabnis’s spirit and his words is at once “burned” or “branded” upon his soul, as if by some unnamed agent, and an agent itself, something that “crept in” from “a godam nightmare.” The description evokes Marx’s famous lines—the “tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living”<sup>291</sup>—especially as Kabnis tells his audience what he “feeds” “it.” Kabnis’s soul wants “beautiful” and “golden” words; the “form” branded on it wants “split-gut, tortured, twisted words.” These words describe lynching, murder, and suicide, what the history of US slavery leaves to the present. “Men make their own history,” Marx writes, “but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”<sup>292</sup> History brands Kabnis’s “soul” in this passage. It remains present in language, which Kabnis expands far beyond sound and syllable. Kabnis describes *all* the material forms in which past circumstances manifest in the present as “words,” and these disturb the relay that moves from the poet’s creative vision to the world. “Looks” are words. Bodies, marked by race, are words. The nation, “this whole damned bloated purple country,” is words. Between the “soul” Kabnis wants desperately to imagine he has and the words he hopes passionately will “fit” it and the South, history interferes, and history *is* language. The idealist poet cannot will his own world. Language, his material, intercedes, bringing with it the accretion of events, horrors, and brutalities that produce both a “branded” Kabnis and the South he would transform.

Kabnis imagines a dual purpose for language in his oration. Words hold out a creative power Kabnis tries to claim for the soul at the same time as they emerge from and feed into the

system of violence, oppression, and destruction the poet hopes to transform with his songs. Kabnis cannot reconcile language's liberating potential with its capacity to reproduce the history out of which it issues. The fact that he must contend with and feel acutely both possibilities disrupts his ambitions. The material properties of language and the historical realities in which it participates therefore prevent the poet from arriving at a new vision of the soul and from understanding his task and function to grow out of such a soul. Another vision of creative activity is therefore needed.

Kabnis does not arrive at one, but he is the best the drama has to give. Halsey and Layman, we learn early, live without hope, and their activities cannot produce change. Father John, the living ghost of the slave past, can only condemn whites for using the bible to justify slavery, a lesson Kabnis finds self-evident and useless in 1923. Hanby, the schoolmaster, imports his ideas and mannerisms from the North and tries to make his black students white.<sup>293</sup> Lewis, the Northern intellectual who visits Sempter to collect information for his research, comes closest to embodying a viable position. As does Kabnis, Lewis questions the practices of the church and denies the transcendental picture of human life still dominant in the South. He takes down accounts of Southern violence as a kind of data, and his empirical, secular attitude strikes Sempter's residents as "queer."<sup>294</sup> In a letter to favorable reviewer Montgomery Gregory, Toomer agrees with Gregory's reading of the play: "Evidently," Gregory had written, "the author's implication is that there must be a welding into one personality of Kabnis and Lewis: the great emotionalism of the race guided and directed by a great purpose and a super-intelligence."<sup>295</sup> Lewis lacks more than "emotionalism," however. He does not learn to speak the language of the South, does not enjoy women or company, and "cannot stand" the "intense" "pain" Kabnis recognizes any transformative, loving intellectual activity must face.<sup>296</sup> Hopeful

and passionate, Kabnis can befriend Southerners and speak as they do, sensitive as he is to the language of a longer tradition of letters and to the rhythms of the region. He can enjoy himself, he can love, and he can bear the grief the past imposes on the present. Most importantly, he recognizes the limits of his own longings, and sees in the material and historical properties of language the source of the creative power he wants but does not yet know how to name.

### **Love and Language Against the “Unimaginative”**

Toomer posed the art of the “lover” against all that was “practical, capable, unfeeling, and unimaginative” in American life, words he used to describe Herbert Hoover and the victory for “Business, Efficiency, Prohibition, [and] Protestantism” his election stood for in 1928. “Hoover,” Toomer wrote in 1929, “convinces us that the world is for business.” For a time, Toomer imagined a poet could oppose the dominant ways of thinking he saw US elites consolidate and expand in his lifetime, ways of thinking he believed over-determined questions of race and identity in the US. Because the logics of power and capital that continue to organize and manage human life for always evolving state and market interests today emerge out of those Toomer identified,<sup>297</sup> his struggle to conceive a way of perceiving life capable of countering them speaks to our present. The vision of the artist as great and powerful integrator of the “real” and the “ideal,” *Cane* suggests, cannot serve this struggle. The poet needs to work instead with a loving attention to language, to others, and to the histories out of which poems emerge.

Because Toomer turned after *Cane* to transcendentalisms more absolute than those he shared with Frank and Locke, he did not take up in his own work the mandate that follows from *Cane*’s most significant insight—the mandate to develop an alternative conception of erotic, poetic activity responsive to historical human life and to finitude. This task *Cane* leaves to those who write after Toomer, to a genealogy of literary writing we identify in the US with such

African American writers as Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison and with other novelists and poets devoted to a view of imagination and reality suited to modern life.

## 5.0 WALLACE STEVENS' LOVE POEMS FOR THE EARTH

*This man loved earth, not heaven, enough to die.*

Wallace Stevens<sup>298</sup>

Wallace Stevens uses the word “erotic” twice in his collected poems. It appears once in “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” (1941) and once in *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942). The earlier and shorter poem lists “Plato, the reddened flower, the erotic bird” as the “still helpful things” that “helpless philosophers” say in the face of “the death you die.” In the *Notes*, an “erotic perfume, half of the body, half/Of an obvious acid” closes the first canto under the poem’s second structuring imperative, *It Must Change*. This perfume, like the “blunt” and obvious “booming and booming of the new-come bee,” “is sure what it intends” in a world of change. In Stevens’ universe—his “planet on the table”—only the bird philosophers imagine to comfort us because we die and an agential scent certain of its purpose, a fragrance part “visible change”<sup>299</sup> and part flesh one catches amidst a rendered scene of “violets, doves, girls, bees, and hyacinths,” are erotic.

When Stevens invokes the “erotic” in the wartime poetry of the early 1940s, these instances suggest, he does so with the word’s long philosophical history in mind. This much we might infer when Stevens names Plato alongside a feathered creature that recalls from Socrates’ impassioned palinode in the *Phaedrus* the figure of the “winged” soul inspired by the divine madness of *Eros*.<sup>300</sup> “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” the essay Stevens composed

soon after “Extracts” and shortly before the *Notes*, also begins with this familiar figure.<sup>301</sup> Read together, these texts show Stevens deeply engaged with the history of the erotic at the most remarkable moment of transformation his poetry displays.<sup>302</sup> At the great (if late) center *Notes* makes for a career that begins with *Harmonium*’s ironic delights and moves on after the Second World War to life’s denser transports, *Eros* and its *topoi* lie.

The history of the erotic that begins with Plato’s originary engagement and moves through such Christian pedagogues as Paul and Augustine of Hippo into the tradition dominant in Stevens’ native US binds under the name of *Eros* creative human activities and human reproductive activities. The tradition understands both to be inspired and conditioned by the basic fact of finitude that defines life on earth. In Plato’s small canon of erotic dialogues,<sup>303</sup> Socrates and others describe *Eros*’s frenzied composite of love and desire as in essence a will to negate mortality. The desire *Eros* figures, Diotima tells Socrates in the *Symposium*, “is wanting to possess the good forever,”<sup>304</sup> and because no human lover lives forever, Plato’s erotic vision also requires the lover “desire immortality along with the good.”<sup>305</sup> Humans love because humans die, and we seek to transform ourselves through love into something that does not.

Two modes of activity are oriented toward this desire: sexual reproduction, which humans hold in common with animal forms of finite life,<sup>306</sup> and the more diverse set of activities the dialogues develop around creative and poetic practices of making (*poesis*) particular to humans. Philosophy, needless to say, takes precedence among these, although politics, enterprise, and poetry are also understood to be erotic activities set against finitude. In the idealist erotic tradition, love for the transcendental good renders abject the things of this earth because they are temporary, and so insists properly directed erotic human activity abjures them. Pushed to its limit, this erotic mode not only seeks to move beyond the earth; it also hates it. As

Augustine, Neo-Platonic inheritor of transcendental *Eros*, writes, “God then alone must be loved; and all this world, that is, all sensible things, are to be despised.”<sup>307</sup>

The themes and problems this tradition constellates around *Eros* Stevens sounds strongly in the primary texts of the early 1940s. Stevens’ critics have long marked his engagement with and revision of Platonism, but none have elaborated the particularly erotic nature of his engagement with the transcendental imagination.<sup>308</sup> The *Phaedrus*, Plato’s most erotic dialogue, makes a powerful claim on Stevens’ attention in this period. Attention to its tropes and ideas appear in the essay that borrows from the dialogue the organizing figure of the soul Stevens at once admires as an enduring work of the imagination and rejects as *démodé* and unreal by the twentieth century. Echoes of the dialogue, which stages a scene of erotic instruction between Socrates and the beautiful Phaedrus, also resonate in *Parts of a World* and the *Notes*, poetry concerned in the broadest terms with love, death, language, and the relationship between these.

In Plato’s work, Phaedrus, the young interlocutor who prompts the *Symposium*’s round of love talk, is to be instructed in the ways and means of *Eros* in the capacious sense Plato gives the term. Socrates pursues with him questions of the erotic activities of composition, poetry, and rhetoric—of good speaking and writing. Reading, delivering, and analyzing a series of speeches that all take as subject the passions and mores of pederastic love, the two discourse upon the nature of love and language. In “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” and in the *Notes*, both poems that belong to Stevens’ pedagogic mode,<sup>309</sup> Stevens stages scenes of instruction that resonate with Socrates’ erotic *topoi*. “Extracts” is a poem that in its tonal and thematic features typifies the collection in which it appears and makes explicit Stevens’ engagement with Plato’s erotics at this time. The *Notes* is Stevens’ most jubilant illustration of this engagement. Stevens names both for language practices that loosely gather and order groups

of shorter cantos into prolonged erotic lessons, although the fragmentary and tentative genres both titles indicate structure those lessons announce at once the reader should expect no absolute conclusions to emerge.

Together with “The Noble Rider,” these poems bring out a picture of Stevens as a poet whose modern improvisations are deeply informed by a genealogy of what we may call erotic imagination. At Stevens’ historical moment, diverse minds faced with the severe and global brutalities of the First and Second World Wars renewed intensely interest in those creative powers and activities associated with *Eros*, old figure or force of love and desire. Sigmund Freud, who appears as an antagonist in Stevens’ prose works and as an object of mild and casual disdain in his letters, is the major figure the twentieth century leaves to this tradition of erotic imagination.<sup>310</sup> Among Anglophone poets in the US and abroad, erotic preoccupations pervade the work of Mina Loy,<sup>311</sup> Hart Crane,<sup>312</sup> Gertrude Stein,<sup>313</sup> H.D.,<sup>314</sup> and Stevens’ friend and competitor William Carlos Williams. As Stevens does, these writers in general attempt from a secular vantage to re-imagine *Eros* within the intractable constraints of the world away from which Plato and Christian mythology turn.<sup>315</sup>

With an attention to Plato’s originary project this chapter preserves, Stevens approaches and revises the transcendental foundations of the erotic tradition along its vital seams. As readers of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* will recall, Platonic erotic activity imagines the loving, desiring human to be in essence an immortal soul who strives by way of dialectical modes of thinking and speaking to leave behind the finite things of this world for the metaphysical fulfillments of eternal truth. Stevens upholds the barest shape of this vision of *Eros*. He imagines across the long career the *Notes* epitomizes love and desire to be fundamental to finite, mortal life. The poetry suggests we direct by our objects of love and desire and the means by which we pursue them the



erotic activities of *poesis* that produce the self and its world. Because the “soul” and its overtures to immortality seem in Stevens’ time “antiquated and rustic,”<sup>316</sup> the basic structural symmetry of these integrations gives way to profuse difference at every other point. If human love can no longer be said to arouse a repudiated soul to immortality—through words or flesh—the activities love inspires spring from other sources and find a way to different fulfillments. Stevens’ vision of *Eros*, central enough in the poetry one can call his larger project an erotic one, refigures out of Plato’s erotic picture the nature of the loving human, the object of human desire, the possible satisfactions the loving human can attain, and the means by which such attainments should be pursued. Humans are mortal, not eternal; humans love the contingent, singular things of this world, not an immaterial ideal safe from change; erotic activity satisfies by producing the truth of “fiction” or temporary illusion, not permanent truth; language is the means by which we arrive at the illusion that is the only truth we know, not a medium opposed to reality. Out of these reversals and transformations, Stevens realizes a poetry that would install love and its effects on earth and in the world at a moment defined by the great pressures of modern war and the loss of “all the great things.”

This erotic project unfolds at the indissoluble intersection of Stevens’ master terms for his work, reality and the imagination. To trace some of its contours, the chapter reads “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” as one of Stevens’ most explicit affirmations of finitude, generative of erotic activity, before the *Notes*. Within the rhythms of its didactic song, the poem gathers out of the variety of *Harmonium*, *Ideas of Order*, and *Parts of a World* some of the formal principles and thematic problems constitutive for the erotic project to which Stevens returns in the longer poem. In “Extracts,” Stevens celebrates mortality through a series of dialectical oppositions that adapt and undercut philosophy’s dominant method and its structuring

oppositions. The poem prefigures the “abstract” mode of poetic activity the *Notes* describes and practices and introduces its stakes for a vision of the erotic grounded in earthly life. A preparation of sorts for the *Notes*, as many of the early poems can seem, “Extracts” and *Parts of a World* perform some of the work of clearing necessary for the vast and rich cosmology of general ideas and loved particularities Stevens generates there.

“Persistently erotic,” as Helen Vendler writes,<sup>317</sup> the *Notes* proliferates the forms, orders, and difficulties of earthly love and erotic activity when these no longer aspire to immortality and permanent truth. Another scene of instruction close to the *Phaedrus* that is a presence in its opening cantos, the *Notes* gives most elegant expression to Stevens’ thusly transfigured erotic vision. In it, Stevens projects for the poet a mode of creative, erotic activity that brings the mind to illusion (“supreme fiction”), rather than the soul to truth. Given this basic shift, Stevens reimagines and rearranges in music the terms fundamental to the Platonic erotic tradition—the identity of the human, of truth, of language’s capabilities and forms, and of the possibilities for pain and pleasure the lover encounters on earth. Because the human must be conceived as mortal, the objects toward which we direct our desires, our notion of what it means to be human, and the methods by which we make meaning of reality out of our desires, change in Stevens’ poetics.

To place Stevens within a genealogy of the erotic is to understand with care for the particulars of his imagination both the historical origins and inventions and the contemporary energies that animate the secularizing modern project critics recognize in his work.<sup>318</sup> Stevens writes that “the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written.”<sup>319</sup> Stevens’ poems of the earth are love poems. Recognizing them as such helps bring to the fore the stakes of Stevens’ poetic project, which he imagined to strive for a “an

interdependence of the imagination and reality”<sup>320</sup> that would “help people to live their lives.”<sup>321</sup> When we read his project as an erotic one grounded in love for the particular things of this world, attentive above all to the forms we make out, he does not seem the formally conservative escapist epicure critics in his time and ours sometimes take him to be.

It is important we read Stevens’ poems in this way, not only because recent controversy suggests the difficult poet’s place in the American canon is not as secure as it might have been thirty years ago.<sup>322</sup> It is important because Stevens elaborates a way of thinking about secular, historical human life that sets itself in opposition to still-dominant conceptions of history and truth, which continue to inform aggressive and brutal action by the state, corporate, and other global entities that shape our contemporary world. Stevens belongs to a tradition of American writers who identify the negative consequences of the desires that drive our dominant intellectual paradigms, our pursuit of universal truths and of transcendental experience, and the actions these desires continue to license in the world. Stevens viewed “most modern activity” as a kind of clearing away of the imaginative projections of the past, an attempt across fields to “ge[t] rid of the paint” of “[p]owerful integrations of the imagination” in order to “get at the world itself.”<sup>323</sup> While this mode of clearing takes significant place in the picture of poetic activity he puts forth in the *Notes* and across his oeuvre, he understood that “the world itself” is only accessible through the integrations of the imagination “modern activity,” and the American sensibility especially, often denies. From this grows the positive and productive dimension of Stevens’ poetry. His work participates in the effort to imagine, foster, and produce different desires and objects of pursuit through imaginative forms, a project of broad and collective concern that has defined a tradition of formally experimental literary practice in the US and elsewhere. To claim

Stevens for such a tradition is to refute the way he is sometimes understood by scholars and critics who read his work, whether they consider themselves his friends or his enemies.<sup>324</sup>

More than thirty years ago, Joseph Riddel observed of Wallace Stevens criticism what is now received wisdom repeated by critics who take up Stevens with a necessary sense of belated anxiety.<sup>325</sup> “Stevens,” Riddel remarked, “is an exceptional instance among American modernists in being the poet who has served as an exemplary model for almost every mode and theory of literary criticism from the 1930s to the present, even when these theories were sharply contradictory and mutually exclusive.”<sup>326</sup> This continues to be true of a poet who has supported rich and impassioned readings by critics who identify themselves, diversely, with New Criticism, Freud,<sup>327</sup> deconstruction, phenomenology,<sup>328</sup> Heidegger,<sup>329</sup> new historicism,<sup>330</sup> and, more recently, affect theory,<sup>331</sup> to name only several of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century’s methodological allegiances. Critical diversity, however, masks an identity that many who appreciate and defend Stevens as a strong and important poet share with those who dismiss Stevens as an apolitical consumer of exotic fruits trapped in an unhappy and sexless marriage. First, critics of almost any orientation treat Stevens as an obfuscating force whose poetry hides something—be it the sources of his literary influence,<sup>332</sup> the dissatisfactions of his personal and sexual life,<sup>333</sup> the complicity of his poems with masculine and bourgeois American desires,<sup>334</sup> or an extreme repression of the political in the abstract<sup>335</sup>—that the critic’s hermeneutic work must then reveal. This approach not only desires and pursues the obviously unattainable satisfactions of authorial intention; it also transforms into allegory many of the clear and specific statements Stevens makes about the function and nature of poetry as a worldly activity—that is, a pursuit with identifiable effects in the world.

Second, the view Stevens' unsympathetic readers endorse differs little from that of the poet's most ardent lovers. Those who appreciate Stevens most often do so because they view him as a poet invested in the literary as an autonomous activity, either romantic or modern in nature. Those who revile him as the epitome of early-twentieth century aesthetic escapism see him the same way. For Harold Bloom and for Helen Vendler,<sup>336</sup> whose readings of desire and truth in Stevens remain unsurpassed in both enthusiasm and elegance, Stevens is still the successful inheritor of an ahistorical literary tradition the herculean struggles of which take place outside the arena of public life. Whether this arena is the individual poet-genius's private home, as for Vendler, or the transcendental battleground on which Harold Bloom stages all of the confrontations between literary giants he values, the effect is the same. Those who question the value of Stevens' project most often do so for precisely the same reasons, calling him, not strong and original, but irresponsible and unable to confront the concrete, "real-world" challenges of his moment. This tradition of Stevens' commentary stretches to include such early Marxist detractors as Stanley Burnshaw<sup>337</sup> (who drove Stevens to satirize him in verse<sup>338</sup>) and such recent critics as Frank Lentricchia and Marjorie Perloff (who recently remarked to Charles Bernstein that Stevens remains "finally...too solipsistic" for her tastes<sup>339</sup>).

It is significant that the critics who celebrate Stevens and the critics who dismiss him as a conservative *petit bourgeois* differ little in the way they understand the poet's project. Stevens denied that poetry can or should serve any narrow and determinant social obligation, but his understanding of poetry's function as a broadly imaginative and not only literary activity prevented him from claiming it autonomous. Perloff endorses Bloom's Romantic Stevens to prove his poetry inferior to Pound's formally executed sense of modernity's political demands. Lentricchia challenges Vendler's attempt to recover from abstraction Stevens' personal sadness

only to keep Stevens' strange and failed marriage at the forefront of his own "historical" reading. This conversation makes it difficult to claim that Stevens' understood either the world or poetry's function in it. Read in the tradition of erotic imagination, this is precisely what Stevens labors, out of love for the world, to help us understand.<sup>340</sup>

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Readers of Plato know the *Phaedrus* is remarkable because Socrates speaks there as a poet stirred by the divine and transcendent madness of *Eros*. He works up in sublime poetic style the picture of the soul with which Stevens opens "The Noble Rider," a tripartite charioteer yoked to two winged horses, one of "noble" and the other of "ignoble" breed. The figure gives form in metaphor to the unrepresentable cycle of perception, forgetting, and desire by which Plato's Socrates imagines a soul moves back and forth between earth and eternity. The soul's charioteer begins in heaven, where the gods lead him to vistas that open onto a field of Being. There, he perceives the immaterial ideal Forms Socrates says his metaphors of sight and space cannot represent. Unable to stay close to these Forms, as gods can, the soul in the heavens forgets the ideals its heroic chariot work allowed it to glimpse. Caught up in a long narrative of vision and amnesia, it forgets the Forms it almost knew and falls, wingless, to earth, where it takes abject mortal form. On earth, the physical beauty of a beloved recalls to the soul in love the ideal of beauty it once perceived. It is moved to madness. It is lovesick. In the presence of earthly beauty, it begins to sprout again the wings it lost. In order to turn this love toward mortality's divinely sanctioned transcendental aims, however, lover and beloved must forsake the pleasures of consummation flesh wants for a relationship that aspires toward the education of the soul. Managed properly and oriented toward immortality, Socrates says, love should lead to "the assigned regimen of philosophy,"<sup>341</sup> pursuit of the good and beautiful as these exist outside of

time and space in a realm of pure and permanent Being. Lover and beloved again grow wings if they practice this regimen, and rise once more in their knowledge of truth to transcendental realms.

Socrates delivers his palinode on love within a broader discussion of the other erotic activity with which he and Phaedrus are primarily concerned—composing good speeches. Just as the lover properly directs his love of the beautiful beloved beyond the particulars of earthly life and toward eternal knowledge of the ideal of beauty, so must speech properly composed move the souls of its speakers and auditors beyond the multiplicitous and finite phenomena of this world and toward the permanent truth good speech attempts to approximate. Speech in its “nature” directs “the soul”<sup>342</sup> to the same truth love recalls to it, to “the very being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colourless, formless, intangible essence, visible only to mind, the pilot of the soul.”<sup>343</sup> The good speechmaker accomplishes this only if he is a “dialectician,” a skilled practitioner of the complementary “processes of division and generalization” of which Socrates declares himself “a great lover” and demonstrates in his speeches he commands.<sup>344</sup> The dialectician masters on the one hand “the comprehension of scattered particulars in one idea.” On the other, he masters proper “division into species” of larger wholes. His erotic practices thus bring together and break apart, in speech that aspires to truth, profuse difference. To do so well is “noble,”<sup>345</sup> a “pursuit” that “sows and plants” the seeds of “immortal” discourse in souls these seeds make “happy to the utmost extent of human happiness.”<sup>346</sup> As does love for beautiful others, love for good speeches elevates and satisfies the lover by directing beyond the possession of the degraded forms of earth erotic energies that seek instead immortality.

Nobility, for Plato variously conferred by erotic activity directed toward the eternal, is as its title signals the central thread in Stevens’ “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” A

genealogical account of historically shifting nobilities that moves through Plato to Verrocchio, Cervantes, and the fanciful sculptor of Washington's monument to General Jackson, Stevens links the noble to the capacities of the human imagination as it works in relation to the reality it at once encounters and helps to produce. The "imagination gives to everything it touches a peculiarity," Stevens writes, "and it seems to me that the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility."<sup>347</sup> The imagination's "nobility," Stevens says, "is the source of...our spiritual height and depth,"<sup>348</sup> and one finds its embarrassingly outmoded forms scattered throughout the "cemetery of nobilities" that is the history of poetry.<sup>349</sup> Socrates' figure of the erotically inspired soul is one such dead figure, no longer to be realized in the mind and blood of the modern reader for whom "the soul no longer exists."<sup>350</sup> Stevens is careful not to say that the task of the poet is to produce for his moment new figures of nobility; the poet "denies that he has a task and considers the organization of material poetica a contradiction in terms." At the same time, Stevens says, the "sensitive poet, conscious of negations...requires of himself" nothing more "persistently" than the difficult and evasive "affirmations of nobility."<sup>351</sup> If the poet's "role," realized differently at any time and in any place, "is to help people to live their lives," Stevens says the poet does so by meeting the violent pressures of reality with the imagination's capacity to make noble forms.

Plato's figure of the soul no longer helps anyone to live a life, not because the charioteer does not exist—the charioteer is as "unreal for Plato as he is for us."<sup>352</sup> Socrates makes this clear when he introduces the image. The figure is no help because it orients itself and the sense of nobility it aims to inspire toward an impossible and historically outmoded aspiration for transcendence. It does not "adhere" to reality. If poets are to make anew for modernity the ennobling language forms the value of which Stevens sets against reality's great violence, their



tropes and figures of speech can no longer be directed toward the metaphysical ambitions of imaginations past. This means not only the charioteer is “antiquated and rustic.” The dialectical method for organizing speech Socrates couples with philosophy’s pursuit of timeless truth also bears the poet’s revisions as his imagination tries to adhere to the conditions of the reality he recognizes in his historical moment. For Socrates, “reality” exists above and beyond materiality, and the dialectician’s precise unifications and divisions bring the mind closer to that beyond. For Stevens, reality is encountered on earth. It is “things as they are.” It is a reality of “the life that is lived” in the “external scene” of the world, and the imagination helps to create our sense of it as much as the imagination must account for its obdurate facts.<sup>353</sup> The forms of erotic making such a notion of “reality” inspires and requires depart from and revise the anchoring absolutes that drive the dialectician’s use of language.

Stevens thus joins a genealogy of *Eros* that understands human desire, love, and the practices of making the erotic inspires to be indissolubly bound up with mortality and its determinant penury. The nature of the bind between love, death, and making, however, shifts radically in his poetry. The contingent and temporary character of life is not something our passions stir us to refute, even as the imagination, Stevens says in “The Noble Rider,” must help to mediate and give meaning to the violence of the world. The imagination provides through its forms a kind of “escape” that paradoxically must hold fast to the pressures away from which it turns, but it can no longer claim immortality as a comfort. Acknowledging the intractable reality of finitude, Stevens recognizes mortality as the condition for which all erotic activity must account. The poetry of earth does not imagine death away, but reinstates finite objects as love objects. When poetry does, it proliferates new words, new “music,” new “vibrations” equal to and ennobling of death’s intransigence. In the poems written around the same time as Stevens’

reflections on nobility, Stevens creates forms and figures of speech—literally, sounds, as he emphasizes in “The Noble Rider”—that reject immortality as the dominant object of human love and desire. Toward this different erotic project, Stevens at once partakes of Plato’s dialectical integrations and divisions and reorients them. His poems revise the relationship between finite particulars and general ideas Socrates’ dialectic assumes when it champions immaterial generality over what Stevens calls the “peculiar.”

“Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” takes part in this work, prefiguring in its dialectical movement the mode of “abstraction” Stevens emphasizes in the *Notes*. A poetry that wants to elevate life and distinguish its experiences, not in spite of the fact that, but because life on earth is not permanent, finds a means to understand without repudiating its death’s finality. The condensed or excerpted fragments of “Extracts” scholarly addresses propagate speeches in the act of finding, through dialectical integrations that differ from Plato’s, such a means. The poem accounts in theme and form for the way ideas and reality stand in mutually constituting relation when that reality is no longer the stable one that exists only in the mind. Central to this shift is the changed relationship between the world of material things and language, a relationship of inadequacy and opposition in the erotic tradition Stevens challenges. The first two of eight “Extracts” pair with the final canto of the poem to refigure this relationship and its consequences. The poem’s intervening sections improvise around a poet figure at his erotic work. A “lover of words,” this poet relies upon forms of integration and abstraction that differ in shape and aspiration from those of philosophy’s “lovers of truth.”

“Extracts” opens with an elegiac and academic oration that intones upon the relationship of “written words” and “paper” reproductions to the things of nature they resemble or represent. The speaker juxtaposes “the false rose” with “the silent rose” and concludes the first canto by

integrating the two: “The false and the true are one.” On the way, the speaker makes use of the rhetorical conventions of scholarly procedure. Canto I begins:

A crinkled paper makes a brilliant sound.  
The wrinkled roses tinkle, the paper ones,  
And the ear is glass, in which the noises pelt,  
The false rose—Compare the silent rose of the sun  
And rain, the blood-rose living in its smell,  
With this paper, this dust. That states the point.

The speaker introduces for contemplation a rose of paper. His observations about its particular qualities—the sounds it makes, its texture, its effect on the ear—build toward a concluding proposition or evaluation, but he breaks off. He introduces suddenly another rose, the silent one, and bids in the language of argument his audience “compare” the two, concluding that this act of observation “states the point” he wants to develop.

Stevens’ orator has not stated a point, however. He does not complete the movement between the concrete and the abstract, between the observable features of the roses and the conclusions one can draw from them. He has held up to scrutiny two different items. The simple act of naming these items in succession is to stand in for “the point,” but the descriptors that differentiate the roses make the point an ambiguous one. A rose of paper makes “a brilliant sound”—the quality of which the repeated consonants in “crinkled,” “wrinkled,” and “tinkle” sound. The descriptor “brilliant” suggests this trait is an excellence. The “rose of the sun/And rain,” in contrast, is silent. It makes none of the brilliant sounds the paper rose makes. Its identifying sensuous feature is instead its “smell.” Each rose thus stimulates for the one who perceives it a different sense. A comparison of the two seems to yield no judgment beyond the

observation that they differ, unless to associate the paper rose with “dust” in the stanza’s final line is to rule in favor of the silent rose. Under scrutiny, the stanza’s structuring mode of reasoning argument, punctuated by argument’s markers of comparison and summary, gives way and withholds the expected yield of clear and polemical conclusion such a mode promises. The particular fails to yield the general.

The rhetorical conventions of argument and address punctuate the entire poem: “Messieurs”; “And now of that”; “Let the Secretary for Porcelain observe”; “My beards, attend”; “if” this, “then” that, etc. Stevens’ use of these conventions, which belong to the institutional (“academy”) and philosophical (“fine ideas”) setting the poem’s title names, invites the mind to participate in the experiences and outcomes associated with argument, with reason, and with philosophy, but the poem’s form produces in the end a different set of effects. This is the first lesson to learn at the scene of instruction Stevens stages, and the reader learns it by the end of the first canto. The dialectical synthesis that concludes the canto—“The false and true are one”—repudiates the central assumption and aim of the genre it mimics. For the philosopher, the dialectical method aims to arrive at truth, even if Plato accounts for language’s inability to fulfill a purely mimetic function.<sup>354</sup> In the *Phaedrus*, the basic relationship between language and things Socrates’ privileged dialectician presupposes is above all a relationship of the inadequate and approximate to the absolutely true. When Socrates offers in the language of metaphor an unparalleled vision of those ideal Forms which cannot be known, represented, or seen, he gives form to the soul and to the ideal by way of the kind of poetic activity he condemns in the *Republic* and the *Ion* as thrice removed from the transcendental real.<sup>355</sup> In the translation Stevens cites in “The Noble Rider,” Socrates introduces his image of the soul as one of only human and therefore insufficient discourse: “Of the nature of the soul, though her true form be ever a theme

of large and more than mortal discourse, let me speak briefly, and in a figure.”<sup>356</sup> Later, he claims to forget the details of his mad “hymn in honour of Love,” the central image of which he describes as “a tolerably credible and possibly true though partly erring myth.”<sup>357</sup> Even as Socrates shows he is a master of them, he qualifies and disparages a speaker’s use of tropes to bring the soul to truth.

Stevens’ speaker in “Extracts” arrives by way of philosophy’s dialectical forms at a conclusion those forms cannot accept—the identity of truth and falsehood, of word and thing. “The paper rose” and the “blood-rose” stand not in opposition, but in a state of mutual constitution. This impossible synthesis, by way of dialectic’s movement between the concrete and the abstract, brings together what philosophy rends. It also answers, obliquely, the question Stevens’ speaker poses: “Where is the summer warm enough to walk...as part/Of reality, beyond the knowledge of what/Is real, part of a land beyond the mind?” There is no such time, no such place, no such Eden. Ours is “an artificial world,” generated at once by reality and imagination, by the “paper rose,” and by the “blood-rose.”<sup>358</sup> The two depend upon each other—the “sea is so many written words.”

The first canto and the paradoxical synthesis with which it concludes establish the ground of improvisation for the rest of the extracts. Canto II poses again the relationship between the imagination’s abstractions and peculiar reality; now, it is art and images of the kind Keats finds on pottery<sup>359</sup> Stevens’ speaker invokes:

The eye believes and its communion takes.

The spirit laughs to see the eye believe

And its communion take. And now of that.

Let the Secretary for Porcelain observe

That evil made magic, as in catastrophe,  
If neatly glazed, becomes the same as the fruit  
Of an emperor, the egg-plant of a prince.  
The good is evil's last invention. Thus  
The maker of catastrophe invents the eye  
And through the eye equates ten thousand deaths  
With a single well-tempered apricot, or, say  
An egg-plant of good air.

The stanza does not repudiate art itself. It repudiates the axiom with which Keats' closes his "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."<sup>360</sup> The eye, invented by the act of looking upon the images of catastrophe the artist or poet makes, levels what it encounters. The eye brings together and evaluates on an urn's glazed plane, or, one can generalize, in a poem the eye reads, the most disparate of phenomena, here treated with a fantastic irony. It seems able to unite in beauty such a wildly diverse plurality of phenomena as can include in one category whimsical fruit and mass death. Because the eye does so, the poem suggests, "beauty" and "truth" are not identical on earth. The earthly poet must know more than this.

Stevens here addresses through the romantics the Greeks. When the speaker lectures his Keats, Secretary of Porcelain, he also denies the Attic tradition the urn and its scene of pastoral delight invokes. The words of truth and beauty Keats' porcelain whispers might as well belong to Plato, whose Diotima in the *Symposium* and Socrates elsewhere discourse upon that central Platonic tenet—the identity of truth, beauty, and the good. The primary feature that brings these together as ideal is their permanence—the good, true, and beautiful do not perish. These are the

ideals Keats treats equivocally in his erotic poem, which at once celebrates the eternal, youthful beauty of the painted figures, suspended forever in their scene of unrequited love, and lightly rebukes the coldness of their unmoving, inhuman paradise. Stevens reproaches with more conviction than does Keats the erotic tradition that understands “the good” and the beautiful as metaphysical. “The good,” Stevens writes, “is evil’s last invention.”

The proposition echoes in its strong paradox the dialectical claim that united the false and the true in Stevens’ first extract. Approximating again philosophy’s dominant mode, Stevens brings together into generalized abstraction (good, evil) a host of strange particulars (eyes, egg-plants, apricots, and ten thousand dead). He thus reverses another of the structuring oppositions primary for the transcendental erotic tradition—good and evil, finite and eternal. Harold Bloom has observed that evil here and across Stevens’ canon “takes no moral meaning but is the pain and suffering that we endure from nature alone.”<sup>361</sup> Out of evil, the pain and suffering fundamental to corporeal life, we imagine the good, an endurance erotic desire and its activities can attain. By sourcing the ideal in evil, Stevens makes it complicit with the pain that is its origin and away from which it tries to turn.

The sequence extends and clarifies its reversal of “good” and “evil,” modifying how we are to read the two qualifiers in the rest of the poem. It also sharply emphasizes the erotic ground of the poem’s reversals:

[...]. . . It is death  
That is ten thousand deaths and evil death.  
Be tranquil in your wounds. It is good death  
That puts an end to evil death and dies.  
Be tranquil in your wounds. The placating star

Shall be the gentler for the death you die

And the helpless philosophers say still helpful things.

Plato, the reddened flower, the erotic bird.

In these lines, our sense of the “good” now includes both itself and its opposite. The “good” still refers to the permanent and final, but now it is “death,” impermanence itself, that is final. As the poem synthesizes the false and the true, here Stevens joins permanence and impermanence. One is tranquil in the wounds mortal creatures endure because one can die the “good” and absolute death that puts an end to pain. “Evil death,” immortality, extends pain beyond its bounds on earth. It is no death at all.

Without recourse to the “good,” the philosophers of the final couplet are helpless before death, and their role among the living is not the one Plato imagines when he presents through Socrates the erotic figures these lines invoke. The “helpful things” philosophers “say” are not helpful because they show others a way to escape or mediate finitude, as Socrates imagines he does in the dialogues when he turns those who love him (as Phaedrus and Alcibiades do) toward the good and righteous path of ideal knowledge a lover of wisdom treads. Instead, the philosopher helps as the poet helps—by creating illusions and order through imagination. Combatants in the battle for “meaning” Stevens describes in fable form in “Extracts” fifth canto, the “philosophic assassins” of the Platonic tradition pursue the “singular romance” Stevens calls a “warmth in the blood-world for the pure idea.” What these assassins achieve by this pursuit, however, is what poetry can achieve—a temporary music, “a sound/That clings to the mind like the right sound” for only a time. This view of philosophy anticipates Plato’s position in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” where Stevens addresses him as a poet engaged in a great act of imagination. The erotic, ennobling forms of which Socrates’ palinode is an exemplar



create meaning for life. They do not accomplish their erotic acts of fulfillment by setting one literally on the path to immortality. Philosopher's comfort and tranquilize because their acts of imagination and metaphor are powerful.

The poem's final section brings together most explicitly sounds we compose and the affirmation of mortality the second canto introduces:

We live in a camp...Stanzas of final peace

Lie in the heart's residuum...Amen.

But would it be amen, in choirs, if once

In total war we died and after death

Returned, unable to die again, fated

To endure thereafter every mortal wound,

Beyond a second death, as evil's end?

It is only that we are able to die, to escape

The wounds. Yet to lie buried in evil earth,

If evil never ends, is to return

To evil after death, unable to die

Again and fated to endure beyond

Any mortal end. The chants of final peace

Lie in the heart's residuum.

These stanzas link our understanding of death, and thus, our understanding of our own nature, to our ability to "chant," to create and sing. Against the backdrop of "total war" and impoverished living that marks the poem's historical moment ("camp" rings ominously now), "chants of final

peace” rise from “the heart’s residuum.” Their source and subject is not a life “beyond a second death,” but earth’s ability to bring to an end in death life’s afflictions. Stevens’ speaker sources in the literal remains of the decomposing heart (“residuum”) the imagination’s forms (the “stanzas” and “chants” of song and poetry). These alone help us to be “tranquil in our wounds.”

The final canto shares with the rest of the poem the difficulty and density engendered by the apparent clarity of its rhetorical construction. It does not reason we accept our own mortality and chant the words that help us do so. Rather, it pretends to reason so, and thereby situates in its rhythms, in the blank spaces that punctuate its rhetorical thrusts and withdrawals, the work of thought and deduction. The poem concludes:

How can

We chant if we live in evil and afterward

Lie harshly buried there?

If earth dissolves

Its evil after death, it dissolves it while

We live. Thence come the final chants, the chants

Of the brooder seeking the acutest end

Of speech: to pierce the heart’s residuum

And there to find music for a single line,

Equal to memory, one line in which

The vital music formulates the words.

Behold the men in helmets borne on steel.

Discolored, how they are going to defeat.

In the pause between the penultimate stanza and the rhetorical question “how can we chant” that precedes it, we assume Stevens’ speaker offers in response the proposition “earth dissolves its evil after death.” Our ability to chant originates in our ability to die. “If” this is true, the lines’ conditional construction claims, it follows that the earth “dissolves” its evil “while we live.” How does the earth do so? The conditional’s deceptively neat parallelism encourages us to accept its claim at once, but the sense it makes is difficult. The word “dissolves,” which appears in both clauses, shifts between the two. In the first, it is literal. It extends the motif of physical decay and decomposition the “heart’s residuum” introduces. “Evil,” as established in the second canto, here names mortal suffering, and the literal dirt of earth “dissolves” “after death” the body and with it the experiences of pain it inevitably endured in life. In the second clause, the act of dissolution the earth performs becomes figural. “Earth,” “evil,” and “dissolves” are abstracted. If we die a final death, the construction might say, the pains we bear in life are ameliorated, dissipated, and “thence come the final chants.” Finitude inspires the canto’s figure of erotic making, the “brooder seeking the acutest end of speech,” to sing of the dissolutions and assuagements of life. The poem concludes with an image of men going to a deadly scene of violence, and we are left to read them how we will against the bittersweet chant they close.

The language with which Stevens describes the poet’s “final chants” he will use again in “The Noble Rider.” There, he describes the experience of the world he knows as an experience of a “war-like whole” in which “all the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies...asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence.” This scene “Extracts” final canto makes present in its first line, “We live in a camp,” a word Stevens uses in the essay to describe the twentieth-century’s degraded living conditions. It is under these

conditions of pain and suffering, no longer made comprehensible or justifiable by past beliefs, that the capabilities of the imagination are most needed. Stevens' describes the poet's new erotic role, directed toward earth and the literal sounds that make meaning of it, with urgency. "The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions," Stevens writes, "makes us listen to the words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them."<sup>362</sup> The "brooder" seeking speech's "acutest" end in "Extracts" is the essay's "acutest poet," and the essay's language of "finality" and "vibration" is the poem's language of his "final chants" and "vital music."

The poem and the prose text share a vocabulary and a sense of history's urgent demands, but the poem does not simply replicate the claims Stevens makes in prose. "The Noble Rider" describes the occasion and nature of our need for "chants of final peace." "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" is such a chant, as is *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. The poem's intervening sections improvise around a poet figure at his erotic work. A "lover of words," the poet relies upon dialectical forms that differ in shape and aspiration from those of philosophy's "lovers of truth." The forms these poems proliferate are forms given shape by and addressed to mortals who understand death is something the imagination can transform with its peculiar distinguishing capacities, but cannot circumvent. Chants in this key do not desire the permanent, do not deny language a part in reality, and do not claim to establish final order over earth's conditional multiplicities.

"Extracts" plays over these principles variously in its intervening sections. Most of the several cantos that follow the first two stand as instances of the poetic mode of erotic practice the

poem poses against the transcendental erotic. As he will on a grander scale in the *Notes*, Stevens modulates with narrative scenes and fables the more contentious, didactic, and dialectical cantos that open and close “Extracts.” The entire poem matches in this way the close movement between the general and the particular that structures its lines. Cantos IV, VI, and VII develop a poet figure who will appear in different guise in *Notes*, where “[p]erhaps/The truth depends on a walk around the lake.”<sup>363</sup> “Extracts” poet figure, whose thoughts about thinking Stevens makes available in narrative mode, is “curious about the winter hills” and “the water in the lake” on a cold day at the cusp of spring. Walking out in the weather, as Stevens often did, the poet becomes newly “himself” when winter fades. Stevens opposes this poet to an image of Hercules (“Ercole,” in Italian), another figure of transcendental passion. The Hercules of myth attempts and fails, by divinely appointed system, to become immortal. Stevens’ “Ercole” is thus prone to the mode of “systematic thinking” we may associate with the metaphysical erotic imagination the poem amends, and the speaker cautions him: “To think it is to think the way to death.”

Stevens introduces the poet’s mode of thinking in contrast to that fatal, “systematic” mode:

That other one wanted to think his way to life,  
Sure that the ultimate poem was the mind,  
Or of the mind, or of the mind in these  
Elysia, these days, half earth, half mind;  
Half sun, half thinking of the sun; half sky,  
Half desire for indifference about the sky.

The imagination that brings its desiring thinker to life, rather than to the kind of death in life transcendental ambition delivers, accounts for both the mind that does the thinking and for the

material it encounters in the world. Such thinking, the structure of these lines suggests, revises itself as it moves over its objects. The poet is “sure,” the sequence begins, “the ultimate poem was the mind.” In the lines that follow, that of which he is said to be sure Stevens qualifies far beyond certainty. Each conjunction and preposition turns the statement back upon itself, modifying each definition of “the ultimate poem” Stevens proposes. The poem is the mind, or it is of the mind, or it is of the mind in a place, at a time. It is half of each of these, half earth, half mind, half thinking being, half encountered externality. It is half desire for indifference, half thinking, half sky, half earth. The lines pile up halves that exceed a whole, and revise each apparent conclusion as soon as it is reached. This provisional, self-adjusting form emerges when the poet takes “life” as an erotic object of desire, the “wanted” end of thought. The desiring poet fashions out of the reality he encounters temporary forms that create a sense of life and self.

When the erotic and creative energies of the poet are directed toward the world, the shapes, rhythms, and sounds out of which the poet composes change significantly. Stevens’ poems of the earth can move back and forth between the literal and the figural without the anxiety that attends the philosopher’s tropes. That anxiety depends upon the abasement of earthly life, which can only pursue out of its desires a truth its imperfect language will never attain. More, the poet is free to dwell upon without sublimating the particulars of the loved, finite things the philosopher orients himself beyond to avoid the pain of losing, though the poet must imagine other ways to meet inevitable loss. To do so, earthly poetry proliferates out of language integrations and divisions it knows are neither permanent nor certain. It arrives at belief by ordering and reordering. It makes use of abstraction and specificity, as the dialectician does, but it does so tentatively, temporarily, so its forms can match in variety and time the contingent things it loves. The poet, who Stevens shows in the third person in “Extracts” and elsewhere at

work in this way, becomes in *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* the authoritative voice that guides a disciple (“ephebe”) over a ground of dialectical clearings and projections liberated from metaphysical fiction. The vision of poetic activity that flashes throughout *Parts of a World* and earlier books Stevens concentrates and expands into the *Notes*’ universe of imperatives and suasions.

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The aims and features of the poem Frank Kermode calls Stevens’ “greatest” are familiar. *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* moves across thirty evenly distributed cantos of seven stanzas each toward its titular projection, a kind of provisional belief or sense of life to be elaborated and lived in a time moving ever toward the secular. The “supreme fiction” would be, in Stevens’ words, “something as valid as the idea of God.”<sup>364</sup> So validated, however, it would remain and be recognizable for those who believe it as the “illusion” or “extension of reality” it is.<sup>365</sup> As the title indicates and as Stevens felt pressed to insist often in letters,<sup>366</sup> the *Notes* neither provides systematic guidelines toward the creation of, nor actually creates, the “supreme fiction” that is its subject. Certainly, the poem practices what it describes, but Stevens made careful distinctions about his aims.<sup>367</sup> The poem presents the supreme fiction’s characteristics as the set of imperatives a poet-pedagogue intones to his poet-ephebe: *It Must Be Abstract, It Must Change,* and *It Must Give Pleasure*.

The *Notes* is a poem in the tradition of the erotic imagination, and its title immediately signals the different object of erotic desire with which Stevens’ replaces the philosopher’s coveted truth. While the mad Platonist yearns for and tries to create forms that move the soul toward the ideal, the poet who can comfort and ennoble life on earth yearns and directs his forms toward “fiction” or “illusion.” As Socrates tutors Phaedrus in the ways of the transcendental

erotic, the *Notes*' pedagogue imparts obscure lessons in the practices of earthly love to the ephebe. Under the poem's first imperative, abstraction, Stevens enacts and portrays the dialectical motion by which the poet must move persistently and unceasingly between the particulars of his beloved world and the abstract figurations the imagination projects upon it. Most urgent for the poet to abstract anew from the peculiar real, the sequence concludes, is the human itself, "the idea of man." If the soul no longer explains our essence, we are in need of a new, more real illusion. Stevens' second obligation, change, shifts focus to the earthly particularities that are the poet's to love, and his style gives way to narrative after the instructional tone of the first sequence. Under "change," Stevens reverses the sources of pleasure and pain that attend the erotic in the Platonic tradition. Where change inspires Socrates to renounce the world for the unchanging, Stevens names as most painful what endures beyond its time. *It Must Give Pleasure* extends the terrestrial delights of change as it projects and refigures a transcendental narrative of immortality, seen now as an erotic achievement of the imagination on earth. It closes the *Notes* with a love poem for the earth.

The *Notes*' first lines open immediately onto erotic ground, inscribing for the whole of the poem the object of love the poet's imagination pursues and the experience of fulfillment its pursuit can generate. Stevens begins with this apostrophe:

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?  
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man  
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?  
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,  
Equal in living changingness to the light  
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,



For a moment in the central of our being,

The vivid transience that you bring is peace.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates declares himself a “lover” of speeches if those speeches move the soul to communion with the true. Stevens’ speaker, he announces at once, loves the same object—language—but he loves it differently and for different reasons. Language moves its lover toward a vision of truth not Socrates’. Love of words directs the poet toward a truth that partakes of the “light of living changingness,” temporary and uncertain at the same time that it is certain. Stevens temporalizes and spatializes truth, rendering it within the bounds of earth’s constraints. It becomes, not an ideal, but a meeting place in which the poet and his beloved words sit in provisional light for only a “moment.” This “truth” is the satisfaction loved language brings, and so language is no longer something beyond which the poet must move in an attempt to reach a reality that is language’s absolute other. Loving words, as Stevens also says in “The Noble Rider,” makes possible the meeting in earthly truth—really, illusion or fiction—of which Stevens here sings.

The beloved muse of this apostrophe, the language that brings us in our love to fleeting illumination, is the “supreme fiction” itself. Whether or not this “fiction” is identical with “poetry” Stevens refused to say finally in his commentary on the *Notes*. “Of course, in the long run,” Stevens wrote to Henry Church, “poetry would be the supreme fiction; the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure.”<sup>368</sup> A month or so later, Stevens wrote to Hi Simons, “I ought to say that I have not defined a supreme fiction. A man as familiar with my things as you are will be justified in thinking I mean poetry. I don’t want to say that I don’t mean poetry; I don’t know what I mean.”<sup>369</sup> The difficult nature of these statements and qualifications can be rooted in the capacious and historical notion of “poetry” Stevens

developed over an extended career more than in the question of whether or not one can say simply “the supreme fiction” is “poetry.” Stevens opens his prose collection, *The Necessary Angel*, with an observation about the variable nature of a poet’s work that suggests his broad sense of it: “One function of the poet at any time is to discover by his own thought and feeling what seems to him to be poetry at that time.” Because poetry changes, to declare the supreme fiction poetry is to declare it no easily identifiable thing. What “poetry” does name, Stevens indicates elsewhere, is not a set of literary objects. “Poetry” evokes a broad range of creative activities that brings Stevens’ sense of it close to the Greek *poesis*, a notion of making that gathers much of what Plato unites through *Eros* in his erotic dialogues. Speculating in another note to Church about the nature of poetry, Stevens distinguishes it from literature and liberates it from formal prescription:

poetry means not the language of poetry but the thing itself, wherever it may be found. It does not mean verse any more than philosophy means prose. The subject-matter of poetry is the thing to be ascertained. Offhand, the subject-matter is what comes to mind when one says of the month of August...

“Thou art not August, unless I make thee so”.<sup>370</sup>

If the supreme fiction is poetry, it is poetry in this larger sense. And this larger sense abandons firm classification for an inclusive picture of the human imagination’s many capabilities and endeavors.

Moments of communion with or arrival at the kind of transient truth to which love of language brings the speaker in the opening prelude punctuate the *Notes*’ cadence. They take on corporeal dimension and terrestrial measure. In canto I.vii, for instance, Stevens describes a scene that recollects the poet figure at April’s cold lake in “Extracts.” “Perhaps,” he writes:

The truth depends on a walk around a lake,

A composing as the body tires, a stop

To see hepatica, a stop to watch

A definition growing certain and

A wait within that certainty, a rest

In the swags of pine-trees bordering the lake.

“The truth” here depends (“perhaps”) on the body’s movement through a local world of abundance, the irregular rhythm of which guides the movement of the mind toward “definition.” These lines give a sense of this movement in meter as they start, stop, and linger over some small particularity, as the flower hepatica or the conifers. Stevens’ calls moments of truth approached this way “times of inherent excellence,” “not balances/ That we achieve but balances that happen,/As a man and woman meet and love forthwith.” The simile brings to the fore the erotic pitch the revised, embodied picture of possible “truth” in the apostrophe establishes. The man and woman who “meet and love forthwith” are the figure of truth’s “incalculable balances.” The trope’s key “as” suggests immediate love both *is* such a truth and illustrates by comparison the instantaneous, specific, and erotic nature of such a truth.<sup>371</sup>

After the prefatory apostrophe, which seems also to model for the ephebe the erotic allegiances poetic work compels, the poem proper begins with the speaker’s first constraint. The supreme fiction “*Must Be Abstract*.” The movement of thought and word Stevens means by abstraction his best critics have touched often and with grace. Frank Kermode, who announces at

the outset of his brief and elegant treatment of the *Notes* he will not “disgrace Stevens’ greatest poem by plodding commentary,” gives for abstraction this plain gloss:

The act of imaginative abstraction is primary; on it depends all re-imagining. The old ‘integrations’ become obsolete; change creates the need for new ones. Consequently the ‘ephebe,’ the young man in receipt of this obscure advice on how to be a hero or a virile poet—must first cleanse the sun, reality, from all mythical accretions. Only thus can we make it available for new and more relevant ‘plurals,’ his own fiction.<sup>372</sup>

Because the *Notes* is a poem of erotic imagination, “abstraction” stands out as the mode of amatory labor by which the poet directs his desire toward language and toward the finite beings of the earth. Borrowing from Charles Mauron in “The Noble Rider,” Stevens calls the poet “*un amoureux perpétuel* of the world that he contemplates and thereby enriches.”<sup>373</sup> The act of abstraction is his primary means of contemplation and enrichment, and it is therefore an act of love for the world. The poet’s struggle to see, to perceive, and to know is also a struggle to love, and out of love, to make. The poet is to “propose” for the “gay and green” world “[t]he suitable amours,” Stevens writes in the final lines he gathers under “*Change*.”<sup>374</sup> He proposes when he abstracts.

Stevens’ speaker sends his disciple “back to the first idea, to the quick/Of this invention.” He must, as he abstracts, evade the “poisonous...ravishments of truth, so fatal/To the truth itself.” He must perceive and re-imagine “the first idea,” now the “hermit in a poet’s metaphors.” He must do so despite and because of the conditions of modern life, which furnish the backdrop to his “writhing, dumb” efforts in “the celestial ennui of apartments.” Fundamental to his effort is an understanding of desire’s “ancient cycle,” which inaugurates and carries the erotic activity of those who abstract:

The monastic man is an artist. The philosopher  
Appoints man's place in music, say, today.  
But the priest desires. The philosopher desires.

And not to have is the beginning of desire.  
To have what is not is its ancient cycle.  
It is desire at the end of winter, when

It observes the effortless weather turning blue  
And sees the myosotis on its bush.  
Being virile, it hears the calendar hymn.

It knows that what it has is what is not  
And throws it away like a thing of another time,  
As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep.

The stanzas describe and invert the chronology of desire Socrates works up for Phaedrus in his narrative of the mad and winged soul. Stevens' philosophers, priests, and poets begin the same way as do Plato's, in a state of penury, lacking something—"not to have is the beginning of desire." They achieve through their labors what Socrates imagines erotic activity can achieve—"to have what is not." Those lovers who orient their passions toward knowledge of the Forms, in Socrates' fable, can come close to attaining, over the course of a long cycle of perceiving and forgetting, those perfections without substance, that which "is not." In summing it this way, however, Stevens' epigram undercuts Socrates' account of desire's cycle. For Plato, the

inaccessible “what is not” is an ideal reality more real than any earthly materiality and more real than something imagined. The “what is not” the desiring poet has is a different nothing. It is not an ideal, nor an approximation that approaches an ideal, but a provisional invention. Recognized as such, desire’s object may be thrown away “like a thing of another time.” The metaphor by which Stevens extends the picture of desire’s loop is the metaphor that dominates his entire oeuvre, the annual succession of plenty and poverty we feel as the seasons cast off one terrestrial actuality for another. The cycle of the soul moving toward and away from unchanging truth is recast as a cycle of fictions refreshed and renewed in time.

Desire’s cycle is therefore abstraction’s cycle. It unites into a single, interdependent movement the positive<sup>375</sup> and negative<sup>376</sup> habits of mind that are Socrates’ dialectical “principles” or “forms...of speech.”<sup>377</sup> The abstracting poet has at hand the same processes of generalization and division, but he turns them toward new ends.<sup>378</sup> His dialectical modes of thought and speech transport him back and forth between the imagination’s figures and the loved particulars that are his materials. The particular preserves its power to disrupt the poet’s thoughts, which, as in Plato, can never fully account for change and contingency. At the same time, abstraction determines by selecting out of need certain features of our lived sense of reality.<sup>379</sup> The relationship Stevens imagines between language and reality is thus one of simultaneous reduction and production. Abstraction withdraws from multiplicity those features the mind selects as significant and uses them to define a shared quality, essence, or organizing principle that works back over to color what the mind perceives.<sup>380</sup> To give shape in language or image to that which cannot otherwise take form, the poet subtracts from what he encounters those qualities, intimations, or sensations of use to him. The *Notes* intones upon and performs

this double motion of imaginative clearing and projecting, familiar to readers of Stevens' other work.<sup>381</sup>

Stevens appropriates for his altered vision of desire's cycle Socrates' narrative of inspired flight. He makes of Plato's erotic bird a figure of the historically variable and ongoing process of imaginative work under which he subsumes philosophy's ravishments. A language of "winged" and "immaculate" movement indicates Plato is Stevens' interlocutor as he develops the sequence on abstraction, reprising in lyric form "The Noble Rider's" motifs of poetry "realized" in the body and of "nonsense" that "pierces" us so we "yield" to it<sup>382</sup>:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,  
For a moment, the first idea...It satisfies  
Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,  
To an immaculate end. We move between these points:  
From that ever-early candor to its late plural

And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration  
Of what we feel from what we think, of thought  
Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,

An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.  
The poem, through candor, brings back a power again  
That gives a candid kind to everything.

Plato's poetry itself, at its finest in the palinode that sets us to flight through the heavens and follows us from our "immaculate beginning" to our "immaculate end," becomes in this canto (I.iii) a trope that unites and signals the power of all poetic activity. The palinode's controlling image is outmoded, but its latent capacity to inspire serves now as a metaphor for the possible satisfactions of the imagination. Poetry moves us along a continuum of "candor," a variant of truth and openness presented in the *Notes*' language of temporality (here, "early" and "late"). This power takes its effects between thought and the body, what Stevens calls in "The Noble Rider" a poem "realized" and later in the *Notes* "an abstraction blooded." Language invigorates the blood and takes embodied form, a literal, secular re-inscription of Plato's watered wings and the Christian tradition's proverbial word made flesh.

Stevens achieves something different in this sequence than he does in the essay, however. "The Noble Rider" analyzes Plato's charioteer and makes of it an historical example that helps Stevens to explain how the reception and effects of a work of imagination change over time. In the *Notes*, Stevens makes Plato's act of poetic figuration a figure itself. When he does, he preserves its power to soar, to bring the reader along across a narrative of escalation and change. The sequence is not an analysis, a rebuke, or a chronology. It effects the appropriation of one abstraction by another abstraction. Plato's winged symbol of eternity and desire for transcendental truth is integrated into the different and earthly narrative of erotic truth-seeking Stevens imagines. The poet desires beloved truth in language, attains it through abstraction's complex movements, and throws it away for another abstraction when it no longer exhilarates. In troping Plato's trope, the poem performs desire's cycle.

The first several cantos of the *Notes* thus tutor the poet-ephebe in abstraction's difficult appeals and habits. Its concluding cantos concentrate poetry's erotic attentions upon what



Stevens intimates it is most urgent the poet abstract anew for modern life. In the sequence that runs from canto VI to X, the composer of supreme fictions, the one who writes for and sings to others songs that comfort and fulfill, must compose with a renewed sense of the human. To sing for humans, the poet must imagine the nature of the human in general terms. In this, Stevens is close to Socrates, who insists any conception of either erotic love or good writing must begin with knowledge of “the soul.”<sup>383</sup> Because the poet no longer recognizes the human in Socrates’ beautiful fiction, however, “the idea of man” must be gathered again from multiplicity.

“For a long time,” Stevens wrote in a letter the year before his death, “I have thought of adding another section to the NOTES and one in particular: *It Must Be Human*. But I think it would be wrong not to leave well enough alone....”<sup>384</sup> This fourth imperative is already a guiding presence in the *Notes*, which circles the charge to re-imagine human being in terms that are not metaphysical. Two different but related abstractions are in play in this sequence, and Stevens binds them together in a mutually constituting relationship. One is the abstract, heroic figure of the poet, the “major man” who is capable of abstracting both himself and others. The second is the “idea of man” to which the poet as “major man” aspires. “Major man” is not man, and he is not *a* man; he is the sometimes embodied, necessarily abstract “expedient” and “exponent” for “the idea of man” that serves and guides the literal plurality of living humans.

The sequence culminates with this affirmation:

The major abstraction is the idea of man

And major man is its exponent, abler

In the abstract than in his singular,

More fecund as principle than particle,

Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,  
In being more than an exception, part,

Though an heroic part, of the commonal.

The major abstraction is the commonal,

The inanimate, difficult visage. Who is it?

The canto builds its propositions around a gentle consonance between soft “s” and barely hard “f” and so seems to produce the “romantic intonings,” the “hum of thoughts evaded in the mind” the previous canto (I.ix) opposes to “reason’s click-clack,” which cannot give the sense of “major man” that emerges here. The poet as “exponent” of the “idea of man” takes on in resonant tone both senses the word signals. He gathers into himself human capabilities at their height and he expounds, explains, and interprets “the idea of man.” This idea, “fecund” and productive, changes over time as imaginative acts compose and revise it. The heroic “part” that composes it changes, too, and the style of composition changes. In this sense, one unfixed abstraction (the poet) is the interpreter and expounder of another unfixed abstraction (the human).

The “major man,” “the MacCullough,” “the giant of the weather”—through these figures Stevens dramatizes the simultaneous need to understand the human in general and the impossibility of finding finally man’s essence. Canto I.viii sets out the difficulty of the poet’s humanist project:

Can we compose a castle-fortress-home,  
Even with the help of Viollet-le-Duc,  
And set the MacCullough there as major man?

The first idea is an imagined thing.  
The pensive giant prone in violet space  
May be the MacCullough, an expedient,

Logos and logic, crystal hypothesis,  
Incipit and a form to speak the word  
And every latent double in the word,

Beau linguist. But the MacCullough is MacCullough.

It does not follow that major man is man.

Lines from canto I.iv resonate in the rhetorical space the initial question opens: “From this the poem springs: that we live in a place/That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves/And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.” Of our strange and foreign world, of our strange selves, we make out of words a sense of home and identity. “We” make these when we set up “major man,” the poet figure or “pensive giant” who sets to work on transformative integrations of word and thing. The contrast between “major man” and the “MacCullough”—the comical appellation Stevens told Simons “is any name, any man”<sup>385</sup>—Stevens here sets forth is the contrast between “major man” and “man.” “Major man” does not and can never exist in concrete form, but the idea of such a figure aids the collective *poesis* and its projects.

The form of this canto, constructed around a question Stevens answers in hypothetical terms, matches the complicated relationships that are its subject. Stevens offers a provisional figure of “major man” and then withdraws him. The rhythm of introduction and withdrawal,

facilitated by a hypothetical vocabulary (“Can we,” “But,” “may,” “hypothesis”), gives the difficult sense of “major man.” The poet is sometimes an immanent possibility and sometimes an individual, as nobility in “The Noble Rider” is the force of the wave and not the water. We may set up some individual as “major man”...“But the MacCullough is MacCullough.” The disjunction between the abstract and concrete, the distance between the universal and the particular, and the dangers of moving too easily or quickly between one and the other, come into sharp focus when the human is the object of thought. Major man “is and may be but oh! he is, he is.” His being is abstract, however: “Give him/No names. Dismiss him from your images./The hot of him is purest in the heart.” The movement between particular forms and general ideas precludes arrival at a final identity for the human or for the poet.<sup>386</sup> This way lays man’s “apotheosis,” which Stevens rejects at the same time as he borrows its deep and supple sounds. A fiction that loves the human does not reinstall a human ideal where God used to be, as Stevens thought some humanist tendencies did.<sup>387</sup>

Stevens concludes the *Notes* first section with a figure of the human very different from the soul’s charioteer. Instead of the noble rider, the image of the human is a man “in his old coat,/His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town/Looking for what was, where it used to be.” Drawn out of the desire of the “rabbi, grown furious with human wish” and the “chieftain, walking by himself, crying/Most miserable, most victorious,” this concretion brings together into a single vision the “separate figures” of the “commonal” the mad poet sees in the mass of men. The figure is created as the lines withdraw and reassemble into an imagined form the material from which “the major abstraction” comes. The section closes on the charge for thinking and speaking this figure incites. It is “of him, ephebe, to make, to confect/The final elegance, not to console/Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.” Those who would make meaning of life out of

desire and love for it, exponents of the idea of man, must work out of a sense of the human as mortal, common, not consoled by immortality or sanctified by the transcendental.

This final figure signals the formal shift Stevens effects between the first and second sections of the *Notes*. If the first foregrounds the work of abstraction that is the poet's primary mode of erotic activity, the second section, *It Must Change*, proliferates the lush earthly particulars that are the poet's objects of love and thought. In rich and often narrative scenes of "accessible bliss" and sensuous encounter, section two confronts the poet-ephebe with the opulent multiplicity of a world that frustrates and disrupts by its changing nature any attempt at fixed abstraction. The poet who moves between the "peculiar" and the "general," Stevens' subject in one of only two cantos of explicit instruction in this section, always confronts change. Under its heading, Stevens celebrates in buoyant verse the earthly things transcendental eroticism treats as that which the dialectician must bypass to be satisfied. If the poet is a lover of the world, a lover of the finite and variable things of this world, his love for those things requires he take a different attitude toward them. His attitude must be one of care and attention, because it is only by way of care for and attention to "the particulars of rapture" that he can compose satisfying fictions sensitive to an inconstant world.

Formally, *It Must Change* stands in relation to *It Must Be Abstract* as the peculiar stands in relation to the processes of thinking that transform our sense of life. The second section leaves behind the pedagogical imperatives and abstract commands of the first section for lessons the ephebe must discover out of the luxuriant and physical universe of sounds, images, and textures Stevens creates, out of its soaring bees, singing birds, bright fruit, and happy "lovers at last accomplishing/Their love." A poetry that loves the world is sensitive to its repetitions, renewals, and transformations, and these guide Stevens style and subject here. Out of his arrangements

come a sense of the pleasures and pains immanent in the experience of earthly flux, both of which emerge with the section's controlling themes—the illusions of intimate lovers, the redundancies and novelties of art, and the monotonies and freshenings of nature. Throwing off the celebrated stability of subject and object the idealist's erotic imagination needs to organize itself, Stevens sees pain in stagnant endurance and pleasure in variation.

*It Must Change* is the *Notes*' most explicitly erotic section. Stevens generates in it erotic scenes that present an abundance of loving subjects and their objects of desire. "Easy passion and ever-ready love," Stevens writes in canto VII, "are of our earthy birth and here and now/And where we live and everywhere we live." The cantos imagine a man sorry to leave in death "the banjo's twang" and the beauty of his island; a scholar "who writes/The book, hot for another accessible bliss:/The fluctuations of certainty, the change/Of degrees of perception in the scholar's dark"; the fantastical virgin Nanzia Nunzio disrobing before Ozymandias; an entranced man on a bench in the park making seraphs of the swans and music of the wind. These are Stevens' erotic figures, rapt in scenes of earthly love. In varied form, they enact the erotic dialectic canto II.iv presents as "the origin of change":

Two things of opposite nature seem to depend

On one another, as a man depends

On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.

Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace

And forth the particulars of rapture come.

“Music” and “silence,” “North and South,” “morning” and “afternoon”; each pair comes together to produce the new or to effect difference. Most stunning is the simile that shows “sun and rain a plural, like two lovers that walk away in the greenest body.” That these erotic pairings produce and are produced by change, “inconstant objects of inconstant cause/In a universe of inconstancy,”<sup>388</sup> renders them proper objects of the poet’s love and pleasure, rather than of the transcendental ascetic’s abhorrence.

It is significant that among earth’s fecund couples Stevens includes in the same lines as man and woman the generative interdependence of the imagination and reality. He fuses as does the Platonic tradition the erotic activities of *poesis* (the scholar, the poet, the man whose park is his “Theater of Trope”) with the erotic activities of sex and human intimacy (Nanzia Nunzio, lovers accomplishing their love, “booming” bees). Plato treats these two modes of erotic activity together because each has the power to lead man, through his immortal soul, beyond the language or the beings he loves to truth and good. For Stevens, Plato’s picture of erotic activity is a powerful illusion that arises from a projective act of imagination, and it is because both *poesis* and romantic or intimate love lead the lover to produce through abstraction illusions of this kind that the two creative activities are united. The mind and body create out of desire the illusion that is the poem or the illusion that is the lover.

“Poem with Rhythms” (1941), a shorter work of the period just before the *Notes*, prefigures and concentrates the connection between poetic and intimate erotic illusion the longer poem assumes and extends. Its controlling metaphor, which compares the activities of the mind with the shadow of a hand a candle casts on the wall, carries the piece’s complicated punctuation and requires “Poem with Rhythms” be read in full:

The hand between the candle and the wall

Grows large on the wall.

The mind between this light or that and space,  
(This man in a room with an image of the world,  
That woman waiting for the man she loves,)  
Grows large against space:

*There the man sees the image clearly at last.*  
*There the woman receives her lover into her heart*  
*And weeps on his breast, though he never comes.*

It must be that the hand  
Has a will to grow larger on the wall,  
To grow larger and stronger than  
The wall; and that the mind  
Turns to its own figurations and declares,  
*“This image, this love, I compose myself*  
*Of these. In these, I come forth outwardly.*  
*In these, I wear a vital cleanliness,*  
*Not as in air, bright-blue-resembling air,*  
*But as in the powerful mirror of my wish and will.”*<sup>389</sup>



By way of bare statement in the first and second stanzas, Stevens replaces the concrete elements in his opening image—hand, candle, wall—with a second set of abstract elements—mind, light, space. The fourth element, the shadow the hand or mind casts, the reader must supply. Stevens disrupts a smooth transition between these two sets when he introduces a third set of elements in parentheses, now both abstract and concrete. The man with his image of the world and the woman waiting for her lover appear as two tableaux that parallel the spatial arrangement of light the opening figure's triad of elements casts. As the hand's shadow does before the candle, the illusions of each mind grow large in space. The man's mind "grows large" when he clearly sees his fictional image of the world. The woman's mind "grows large" in the fantasy of fulfillment that brings her lover to her. In their parallel "figurations," neither mind conforms to reality. Each satisfies its desire, signified by the light, with an abstract illusion, projected large against the external space of the world. Out of desire's willed figurations, man and woman willfully compose both a world in the image of desire and a self. The mind takes material form in the individuals who "come forth outwardly" from the imagination's powerful projections.

The final stanza shows this power at work when it reverses the direction of determination on which the poem's comparisons depend. At first, the mind grows large because it is like the hand. Later, the hand must have a will because the mind does. The poem's metaphor moves between the concrete particular and the abstract. As it does, each takes its turn as a determinant for the other. The "rhythms" the title indicates are the poem's defining feature come from this movement. Stevens keeps the irregular rhythms of movement between imagination and reality through both the sounds he repeats with "wall" and "space," the denotations of which shift as the words remain identical, and in the poem's visual complexity on the page. (Stevens rarely uses italics or quotation marks, and he deviates selectively from regular metrical and stanzaic

patterns). These formal features render in dense music what Stevens calls in the *Notes* “desire’s ancient cycle.” The poem’s man and woman begin where the cycle begins, in privation, Stevens’ “not to have,” and they end up, after much determining movement between the peculiar and the general, with their illusions, with “what is not.” The act of integrating the world into an image and the act of loving another human thus inspire the mind lit by desire to fantasy. The parallel suggests all lovers are poets and all poets are lovers.

The Ozymandias canto in the *Notes* (II.viii) insists in the same spirit upon erotic illusion as the essential principle of intimacy between human lovers. The fantastical “Nanzia Nunzio” stands before Ozymandias, Shelley’s ruined symbol of man’s fleeting works present here in living flesh. Disrobing, she declares herself “the contemplated spouse,” stripped of adornment and ready to be transformed by the fictional projections of her lover. “Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me/In its own only precious ornament” she commands Ozymandias. “The spouse, the bride/Is never naked,” Ozymandias answers. “A fictive covering/Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.” The erotic fable, made at once light and mythic in tone by its exotic collection of sounds (“z”), the language of confrontation and conflict it chooses for this most intimate of scenes between strangers, and its simple narrative form, suggests it impossible to know one’s lover. Even nude, illusion colors our perception of the one desired.

This is not cause for lament, and it cannot be otherwise. Stevens wrote of this canto to Church: “if we are willing to believe in fiction as an extension of reality, or even as a thing itself in which we must believe, the next consideration is the question of illusion as value. Under the name of escapism this is one of the problems that bothers people. The poem about Ozymandias is an illustration of illusion as value.”<sup>390</sup> We can know and possess those we love only in illusion. Taken to the extreme of this principle’s logic, love itself is illusion, impossible without

imagination, without the “fiction of feeling” proper to human erotic activity. Love is valuable, and therefore, illusion is valuable.

Still, as Stevens emphasizes in “The Noble Rider” and implies in his note to Church, all acts of imagination or escapism are not equal. Some are benign, some necessary, and some ridiculous. Some do not serve present need and so fall away. Some are injurious. Acts of imagination that adhere in balance to the real may be privileged over those that flee it. It is no less critical the erotic extensions by which our love for others takes form adhere to reality than our images of the world struggle to. And the special reality of human beings requires of the imagination a special kind of adherence. Throughout his oeuvre, even in the early poems of *Harmonium*, Stevens understands human beings as historical creatures, who come forth as singular individuals in and because of a world of things and others. “I am what is around me,” he writes in “Theory,” a poem that anticipates the “partaker” who “partakes” in the *Notes* with a touch of irony the later poem abandons. “Women understand this./One is not duchess/A hundred yards from a carriage.”<sup>391</sup> Our worldly nature, determined in large part by our surroundings and the weather, conditions the event and experience of the intimate love we can share.

Paired with the Ozymandias scene in the *Notes*, of which it is an early variant, *Harmonium*’s “The Apostrophe to Vincentine” suggests most strongly the vision of intimate love the *Notes* enlarges among other erotic activities. A hymn of love, “The Apostrophe” unfolds a progression of erotic illusion that makes of the bare human the heavenly lover. The poem’s speaker stages in the first stanza a divesture similar to the one Nanzia Nunzio performs before Ozymandias:

I

I figured you as nude between

Monotonous earth and dark blue sky.

It made you seem so small and lean

And nameless,

Heavenly Vincentine.

The lines reproach the assumption out of which Nanzia Nunzio performs her gesture—that love grows best from an individuation so radical it strips from the human body any trace of the world. The human is not the sun, and to see it in its first idea, as a nude small and lean between earth and sky, is also to divest it of the worldly context that gives the singularity of a human being its reality.<sup>392</sup>

In the sections that follow, the speaker returns Vincentine to the world his imagination first dematerializes around her. He clothes Vincentine in green dress and sees her “walking,/In a group/Of human others,” “talking.” A cadence of rhyme carries through the entire sequence so that the speaker’s love builds in rhythmic song to crescendo in the final section, where the lean animal rises first into and then out of the world on the speaker’s imagination:

IV

And what I knew you felt

Came then.

Monotonous earth I saw become

Illimitable spheres of you,

And that white animal, so lean,

Turned Vincentine,

Turned heavenly Vincentine,

And that white animal, so lean,

Turned heavenly, heavenly Vincentine.

Vincentine becomes, in the end, more than an object of desire. She is herself a desiring subject, one who feels. She cannot be a feeling subject naked on an empty earth. She is one because she walks and talks with others, clothed in the garb of the world. It is this view of her as a social subject, not as a naked object, which transforms her finally for the speaker into the illusion of the sublime lover. The closing lines replay as they lengthen and repeat the imaginative progression of the speaker's erotic projection, transforming the small "Vincentine" to "heavenly Vincentine" and finally to "heavenly, heavenly Vincentine," as if language must grow large and long to approximate the "illimitable spheres" of the lover.

The value of transformative erotic illusion, which "The Apostrophe" epitomizes in narrative song and Ozymandias declares essential to love, dominates the *Notes*. Because the *Notes* is largely a poem about "the particulars of rapture" on earth, about earth's "accessible bliss" and its sibling "expressible bliss," it observes the joyous potentialities of illusion Nanzia Nunzio and Vincentine figure more often than it dwells among the difficulties and pitfalls that attend the earthly lover's erotic imagination.<sup>393</sup> At the same time, the *Notes* addresses itself to the negative possibilities intrinsic to earthly erotic activity.<sup>394</sup> Although the poem celebrates an *Eros* that brings the mind to illusion rather than the soul to truth, Stevens does not affirm change and its fluid fictions by ignoring pain and loss, the basic facts of which drive Plato and the Christian tradition to renounce love on earth unless it aspires through finite objects to eternal ends.

The erotic pedagogy of Socrates and Augustine teaches its disciples not to love the world because the world rewards its lovers with pain and loss. Pain and loss grow out of change in two ways, both of which Socrates in the *Phaedrus* attempts to master and override. First, death on earth is certain. Lover and beloved must die. It is an ineradicable fact of life, and its source is

reality, or change in time, space, and matter. This is the essential fact Plato's gorgeous nonsense attempts to circumvent when Socrates invents the soul. By its great denial of mortality, the myth protects its believer from both the pain of his or her own death and from pain at the death of his or her beloved. Second, no illusion is permanent. Pain and loss attend the mind's figurations as they come and go, and are so sourced in the imagination, or changes in thought and feeling. Socrates admits to Phaedrus, even as he disputes Lysias' employment of this observation toward the offensive, rhetorical repudiation of divine *Eros*, that love for a young and beautiful beloved is a temporary madness that transforms the lover's perception of himself, his beloved, and the world. Love effects a change in perception through imagination, and this causes a deep sense of loss when the beloved spurns the lover, when lovers change, or when love fades with time. Against the eventualities of life and love, Platonic *Eros* also overmasters the imagination's tendency to effect and undergo change. Socrates insists the lover understand his love as a passion for an ideal his soul desires instead of as a desire directed toward the attainments and enjoyments of singular, finite beings. Doing so functions as a proof against the pain of changed feelings, of refusal and of love's diminishment.

Stevens cannot and does not try to alleviate or escape the basic problems away from which this tradition tries to turn, nor does he overmaster them with absolute overtures to stability and immortality. The pain of changing fictions and the pain of real death are present throughout the *Notes*; rhythms of loss and plenty are integrated into the very form of the poem as it vacillates with purpose between winter and spring, birth and death, ennui and inspiration. A regularity—three sections, thirty cantos of seven stanzas each, all with three lines of blank verse—organizes Stevens' stunning multiplicity of noise, image, and idea. Within its habitual meter come together and split apart vast differences, the "visible" emerging from the "invisible,"

“language suddenly, with ease” saying clearly “things it had laboriously spoken,” tedious “repetition” opening onto the absolutely new “beginning.” What Stevens wrote to Simons of the role monotony plays in desire’s cycle of change could be said of the uniformity he imposes throughout the whole of the *Notes*. Of canto II.vi and its songbirds, Stevens says, “There is a repetition of a sound, ké-ké, all over the place. Its monotony unites the separate sounds into one, as a number of faces become one, as all fates become a common fate, as all the bottles blown by a glass blower become one, and as all bishops grow to look alike, etc...In this monotony the desire for change creates change.”<sup>395</sup> The *Notes* is not the stone the bird becomes, but it projects out of a sameness of shape and syllable both the need for change and change itself. It orders persistent fluctuations that grow from monotony and modulates great flights and falls between nothing and what is not.

The greatest pain the *Notes* recognizes in the conditions of earthly life is the pain the mind unable to renew its energies finds when difference ossifies into identity. Despite its singularity, the erotic bird may become for us the stone bird, a kind of death in life. In an era of mass production, factory labor, global war, and the increasing standardization of life attendant upon these, Stevens is one among many to recognize repetition’s troubles. Where such poets as T.S. Eliot or H.D. propose in their face a conservative return to myth, however, Stevens belongs to those who insist erotic, desiring activity turn away from the forms of the past. “Perhaps the man-hero is not the exceptional monster,” he writes, “but he that of repetition is most master.” To master repetition is to recognize it in its many forms, some pleasurable, some painful, and to respond to it in singular kind. Thus, the stone bird requires new abstractions. The erotic scenes of art and faith, the “old seraph, parcel-gilded, among violets,” require new abstractions, because “the distaste we feel for this withered scene/Is that it has not changed enough. It remains,/It is a

repetition.” The statue of the General Du Puy is “rubbish in the end,” the product of “our more vestigial states of mind,” because “major man,” the hero, cannot be identified for all time in an individual and cast forever in bronze. When we seek to make something permanent of that which changes, we create figures of death, garbage.

Unmastered repetition is a kind of emotional death for the living, but real death, “good” death, too appears in the poem as that upon which the erotic imagination projects itself. The fact of finitude remains what the poet and the lover must meet with comforting illusion, as “Extracts from Addresses” and other poems emphasize, and the Canon Aspirin series under section three, *It Must Give Pleasure*, takes up the sublime tradition that makes of the man in slouching pantaloons a powerful immortal. The Canon Aspirin sequence rises to grand climax as it borrows from the metaphysical erotic tradition the *Notes* transforms the figure of an angel serene in the “violent abyss,” outside of time and so outside of desire. The satisfactions of this illusion have their effect within time, however, for the desiring poet who imagines the eternal:

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,

Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,

Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,

Leaps downward through evening’s revelations, and

On his spreaden wings, needs nothing but deep space,

Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,

Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,

Am I that imagine this angel less-satisfied?



Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or is it I that experience this?

Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour

Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have

No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,

Am satisfied without solacing majesty,

And if there is an hour there is a day,

There is a month, a year, there is a time

In which majesty is a mirror of the self:

I have not but I am and as I am, I am.

Stevens' questions build, rupture, and become, in the fifth stanza, their own answer. The interrogative series builds to a breaking point at which the identity of human experience with the experiences the mind projects is no longer in dispute. The sixth stanza, set apart from qualifiers "if" and "is," states simply a response to the tortuous shape of the questions from which the stanzaic break distances it. If the angel says there is "an hour/Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have/no need, am happy, forget need's golden hand," the "I that imagine[s] this angel" "keep[s] saying" the same thing. The hour free of need lengthens, in the final affirmation, to a month, a year, a time, but never to an eternity. Its fulfillments in majesty are the temporary fulfillments of a fiction. Imagining the fulfilled angel has the paradoxical effect of elevating to the height of "majesty" man in a state of indigence: "I have not but I am and as I am, I am." The

immortal angel at last affirms its other, the desiring poet, rather than itself, so the imagination's worldly function overmasters the effects of the transcendental imagination.

Excepting the coda, the *Notes* concludes with a love poem to the earth, "Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night," who under the poet's amorous eye seems "the more than rational distortion,/The fiction that results from feeling." The canto's final line, "You will have stopped revolving except in crystal," usually strikes critics as a note of lyric closure. Vendler sees it celebrate the order the imagination imposes over difference. Perloff invokes it to secure Stevens' place as a romantic who retreats from chaotic modernity into the mind's crystalline orders. The final stanzas seem overdetermined by a play of what Stevens called "negations," however, so that the persistent irony of the poem's penultimate vibration resists celebration or dismissal. Stevens concludes the scene of instruction that is the *Notes* with an ironic representation of institutional pedagogy:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.

We shall return at twilight from the lecture

Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,

I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.

You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

The lessons of the *Notes*, Stevens' ridiculous picture of institutional inversion and self-satisfaction suggests, cannot be institutionalized. Any pleasure of naming, lecturing, or propounding lays open to feeling provoked by place and sensation (the "gilded street"), which here incites the poet to "call...by name" the earth and so foreclose upon the fulfillments of

institutional stability. The poem's unstable and circulating movements between the peculiar and the general again guide the canto: the earth becomes as soon as the poet tries to "name" it "flatly" a "more than natural figure," "familiar yet an aberration." The poet's call may stop the earth from revolving except in crystal, but it may also set it again into liberated motion after the lectures that claim too easily the irrational rational hold it there. The punctuation of the two final sentences allows for either reading. Between these two possibilities—the word that holds fast and the word that transforms—the poet's love for and on earth takes its forms.

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In the months before his death, Stevens completed what was to be his last sustained project in prose, an introduction for the English translation of Paul Valéry's dialogues.<sup>396</sup> Stevens wrote "Two Prefaces" for the Bollingen Foundation's volume *Dialogues*, returning with a spare and careful eye to the pieces in which Valéry brings Socrates and Phaedrus together again for talk of truth, love, and art. Stevens devotes most attention to *Eupalinos, or the Architect*, in which "the shade of Socrates and his friend Phaedrus" meet "in their 'dim habitation' on the bank of the Ilissus"<sup>397</sup> to "discuss whatever the living discuss," in this case, and not accidentally, "aesthetics."<sup>398</sup> The preface to *Eupalinos*, punctuated by a collection of quotations from Valéry's work and letters, contains almost as many of Valéry's words as it does of Stevens'. Stevens lingers with love, almost voluptuously, over Valéry's language. "Merely to share the balance and the imagery of these words," he writes of the passage in which Socrates recalls himself in youth by the sea, "is to share the particular exhilaration of the experience itself."<sup>399</sup> The pleasures of Valéry's text move for Stevens between the exhilarations of the image and "the exhilaration that comes from the progression of the mind,"<sup>400</sup> the excitement of "ideas propounded."<sup>401</sup> *Eupalinos* dwells in both and speaks, through its shades, of both, and when

Stevens collects some of its “ideas” into the long list he includes, we see how close is his own thinking to Valery’s:

Nothing is beautiful which is separable from life, and life is that which dies.

O body of mine...keep watch over my work...Grant me to find in thy alliance the feeling of what is true; temper, strengthen, and confirm my thoughts. Man...fabricates by abstraction.

Man can act only because he can ignore.

That which makes and that which is made are indivisible.

Out of these ideas, Valery gives voice by the end of the dialogue to an “Anti-Socrates,” a shade who creates after death, when all desires are supposed to be satisfied, the kind of fulfilling illusion Stevens sees grow out of the desires of the living. Valery’s Socrates regrets a life devoted to the pursuit of absolutes “through the realm of thought alone” and wishes he had been an architect, an artist. He wants to have been like Eupalinos, the constructor who brings together by his acts the powers of body and mind and says:

‘My intelligence, better inspired, will not, dear body, cease henceforth to call thee to herself; nor wilt thou cease, I trust, to furnish her with thy presences, with thy demands, with thy local ties. For we have at last come to find, thou and I, the means of joining ourselves, and the indissoluble knot of our differences: to wit, a work that is our child...this body and this mind, this presence so invincibly real and this creative absence that strives for possession of our being and which must finally be reconciled, this finite and this infinite which we bring with us, each in accordance with his nature, must now unite in a well-ordered structure...’<sup>402</sup>

Socrates' shade imagines for himself a life devoted to the unities and balances wrought between thought and matter, instead of those to which thought alone aspires. He regrets the "temples" and "theaters" he would have "conceived in the pure Socratic style," "structures ordained entirely for the life and joy of the rosy race of men....Objects most precious for the body, delightful to the soul..."<sup>403</sup> As Stevens says, the "image of the man of action makes the shade of the man of thought regret his life."<sup>404</sup>

The Anti-Socrates Valery imagines is still Socrates. Though a shade, he still makes out of mind and desire illusion, still describes for Phaedrus the deepest longings and highest achievements of human *poesis*. The "discussion over which the mind of Socrates presides" still leaves the reader, Stevens writes, with "a sense of extended and noble unity, a sense of large and long-considered form."<sup>405</sup> It makes sense that Stevens admires in Valery the spirit of this ennobling mind, brought back to discourse on the aesthetic for modernity's afterlife. Socrates and his other, a "latent double" or "late plural" of the Platonic imagination, preside in a similar way over Stevens' poems. Valery's Phaedrus, repeating to Socrates a speech of Eupalinos infinitely more elegant and true than the one Plato's Phaedrus repeats from Lysias, moves Socrates' shade to understand at last the "single thing" he "lacked" in life: "as what was most beautiful would lead you far away from itself, you were always seeing something else."<sup>406</sup> After death, Valery's Socrates realizes what he never could—the nobility of finitude and its material things. Stevens' poetry, still guided by a Socratic passion to make out of desire what will suffice for the mind, takes its form from those very things, beyond which it cannot pass and still be a poetry of the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, State of the Union Address, January 20, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>, (accessed March 1, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> See Declaration of Independence (US 1776). For a typical example of future-oriented mid-nineteenth-century discourse, see John O’Sullivan, “The Great Nation of Futurity” *United States Democratic Review* 23.6 (November 1839): 426-30.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Robert Jauss argues our notions of “modernity” have, since the 1760s, included the sense that “the standard by which the history of the present is to be judged, by which its claim to modernity is to be gauged, lies in the open horizon of the future’s budding perfection and no longer in the paradigms of some perfect past.” See “Modernity and Literary Tradition,” 1970, trans. Christian Thorne, *Critical Inquiry* 31.2 (Winter 2005): 347, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/430964>.

<sup>4</sup> For an etymology of “poiesis,” see Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> House Budget Committee, *Path to Prosperity: Fiscal Year 2015 Budget Resolution*, (April 2014), [budget.house.gov](http://budget.house.gov), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Obama’s budget “reverses the decline in national defense spending of the past five years and proposes to transition enduring overseas contingency operations (OCO) costs to the base budget, to fully fund and account for the costs of keeping the Nation secure.” Office of Management and Budget, *Fiscal Year 2016 Budget of the US Government*, (US Government Printing Office, 2015), 45.

<sup>7</sup> House Budget Committee, 39.

<sup>8</sup> See Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “In Budget, Obama’s Unfettered Case for Spreading the Wealth,” *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/03/us/in-budget-obamas-unfettered-case-for-spreading-the-wealth.html>. Obama proposes the state “increase the capital gains and dividend rate to 28 percent (inclusive of the net investment income tax), the rate at which capital gains were taxed under President Reagan, for the highest-income households,” Office of Management and Budget, “Fiscal Year 2016 Budget,” 55. To suggest it is radical to return tax rates to those Reagan endorsed demonstrates how neoliberal ways of thinking have transformed state policies. That the modest increase to education spending Obama proposes, which will



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continue to support assessment and privatization policies similar to those George W. Bush advocated, seems radical provides further evidence.

<sup>9</sup> See House Budget Committee, 22-3 and Office of Management and Budget, “Fiscal Year 2016 Budget,” 44-51.

<sup>10</sup> See the explanatory document released with Obama’s budget, Office of Management and Budget, *Fiscal Year 2016 Analytic Perspectives of the US Government*, (US Government Printing Office, 2015), 315.

<sup>11</sup> A recent Gallup poll shows more Americans identify themselves with the right—that is, with parties that explicitly endorse neoliberal policies—than with the left (which does not explicitly celebrate free markets). See Jeffrey M. Jones, “US Partisanship Shifts to GOP after Midterms,” *Gallup*, December 2, 2014, [http://www.gallup.com/poll/179840/partisanship-shifts-gop-midterms.aspx?utm\\_source=position3&utm\\_medium=related&utm\\_campaign=tiles](http://www.gallup.com/poll/179840/partisanship-shifts-gop-midterms.aspx?utm_source=position3&utm_medium=related&utm_campaign=tiles).

<sup>12</sup> *Wall Street Journal*, “Free People, Free Markets,” July 7, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-wall-street-journal-125-years-of-free-people-free-markets-1404770480>.

<sup>13</sup> David Harvey. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, New York: Oxford, 2005, 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> See Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014, and Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014. Recent developments in China and Hong Kong, where capitalism flourishes without democratic governance, also indicate free markets and democracy are not related in the ways Milton Friedman claims in *Capitalism and Freedom*, 1962, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. See Arif Dirlik, “The Mouse that Roared: The Democratic Movement in Hong Kong,” *boundary 2*, October 29, 2014, <http://boundary2.org/2014/10/29/the-mouse-that-roared-the-democratic-movement-in-hong-kong-2/>.

<sup>15</sup> Recent elections in Greece demonstrate how harmful austerity measures have been for those who are not wealthy. See Helena Smith, “Leftwing Syriza Party Triumphs in European Elections in Greece,” *The Guardian*, May 25, 2014. See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, (London: Verso, 2004) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of*

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*Empire*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), on the precarious state of pervasive insecurity that defines contemporary life for many.

<sup>16</sup> See Carl Russell and Shan Carter, “How the Giants of Finance Shrank, Then Grew, Under Financial Crisis,” September 12, 2009, *New York Times*,

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/09/12/business/financial-markets-graphic.html>

<sup>17</sup> The “Fact Sheet” entitled “America’s Wars,” distributed by the US department of Veterans affairs in November 2014 lists US wars after the American Revolution. The most recent entry is the “Global War on Terror,” dated “(Oct 2001 -).”

[http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs\\_americas\\_wars.pdf](http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Obama’s response to ISIS is the most recent chapter in this global war. See Serge Schmemmann, “13 Years After 9/11, the War on Terror has a New Focus,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/opinion/sunday/13-years-after-9-11-the-war-on-terror-has-a-new-focus.html>. The National Security Agency continues to collect data, even after Edward Snowden’s controversial revelations. See Charlie Savage and Jeremy W. Peters, “Bill to Restrict N.S.A. Data Collection Blocked in Vote by Senate Republicans,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/us/nsa-phone-records.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/us/nsa-phone-records.html?_r=0).

<sup>19</sup> Several journalists have argued drone strikes perpetuate the fundamentalist violence the US state argues they can prevent. See Ibrahim Mothana, “How Drones Help Al Qaeda,” *New York Times*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/14/opinion/how-drones-help-al-qaeda.html>; Hassan Abbas, “How Drones Create More Terrorists,” *Atlantic*, August 23, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/08/how-drones-create-more-terrorists/278743/>.

<sup>20</sup> Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program,” December 3, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> See Piketty and Paul Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal*, (New York: Norton, 2008), 15.

<sup>22</sup> Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 115.

<sup>23</sup> Jauss, 330. Jauss identifies several of the different modes of historical self-consciousness that have emerged after the Enlightenment. He traces the attitude he sees in late-twentieth century modernity to Baudelaire’s work. For Baudelaire, Jauss argues, aesthetic and intellectual activities

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give a present its character in a way that is constitutive, rather than superficial (362-3). See also Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "material."

<sup>25</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "secular," 1a.

<sup>26</sup> The dissertation challenges M.H. Abrams view that Whitman and Stevens belong to a romantic tradition that attempts, but ultimately fails, to break with Christian metaphysical thinking. See Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973).

<sup>27</sup> Paul Krugman, "When Zombies Win," *New York Times*, December 19, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/20/opinion/20krugman.html>. Others on the left argue Krugman's approach to economics is ultimately complicit with neoliberal ideologies. See Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, (London: Verso, 2014) and Paul Heideman's review of it, "Bulletproof Neoliberalism," in *Jacobin*, Issue 14, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/06/bulletproof-neoliberalism/>. As Mirowski does, Heideman argues Krugman accepts "the fundamental neoclassical economic precepts at the heart of neoliberal policy."

<sup>28</sup> Gregor McLennan, "The Postsecular Turn," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27.4 (July 2010): 3-20. <http://tcs.sagepub.com/content/27/4/3.full.pdf+html>.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman, "Introduction: After the Postsecular," *American Literature*, 86.4 (December 2014) 649, doi 10.1215/00029831-2811622.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1947, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> On anti-Semitism in Europe, see Conor Friedersdorf, "Europe's Increasingly Targeted Jews Take Stock," *Atlantic*, February 27, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/anti-semitism-europe-france-grave->

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desecration-Zvika-Klein/385547/. On systematic race violence in the US, see Michael Eric Dyson, "Where do We Go After Ferguson?" *New York Times*, November 29, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/30/opinion/sunday/where-do-we-go-after-ferguson.html>; Jennifer Steinhauer and Elena Schneider, "Thousands March in Washington to Protest Police Violence," *New York Times*, December 13, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/us/thousands-march-in-washington-to-protest-deaths-by-police.html>; Joseph Goldstein and Nate Schweber, "Man's Death After Chokehold Raises Questions for the Police," *New York Times*, July 18, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/nyregion/staten-island-man-dies-after-he-is-put-in-chokehold-during-arrest.html>. On the "Black Lives Matter" protests in Ferguson, New York, Washington, D.C. (and elsewhere) these killings inspired, see the website <http://blacklivesmatter.com> and George Yancy and Judith Butler, "What's Wrong with 'All Lives Matter'?" *New York Times*, January 12, 2015, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/>.

<sup>35</sup> Bruce Robbins, "Why I Am Not a Postsecularist," *boundary 2* 40.1 (2013): 63, doi:10.1215/01903659-2072873.

<sup>36</sup> See Arif Dirlik, "Crisis and Criticism: The Predicament of Global Modernity," *boundary 2*, September 16, 2014, <http://boundary2.org/2014/09/16/crisis-and-criticism-the-predicament-of-global-modernity/>.

<sup>37</sup> In Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical letter (2005), he explains, "the Greek Old Testament uses the word *eros* only twice, while the New Testament does not use it at all: of the three Greek words for love, *eros*, *philia* (the love of friendship) and *agape*, New Testament writers prefer the last, which occurs rather infrequently in Greek usage." [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html).

<sup>38</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "agape," 2: "Christian love, as distinct from erotic love or simple affection; charity."

<sup>39</sup> See Plato, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic*, in *Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.

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<sup>40</sup> See “Black Lives Matter” movement, <http://blacklivesmatter.com>, and George Yancy and Judith Butler, “What’s Wrong with ‘All Lives Matter’?” *New York Times*, January 12, 2015, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/>.

<sup>41</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 1790, Trans. James Creed Meredith. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> A range of Enlightenment thinkers establish these oppositions, as such writers as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have demonstrated. See Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 1637, and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 1641, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Understanding*, 1690 (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> They also often identify as white. Jean Toomer, who identified as both white and African American, struggles most explicitly in *Cane* with the limits of the erotic creative powers he invents. See Terence Hayes’s poem “Snow,” on Wallace Stevens, in *Lighthead* (New York: Penguin, 2010), for a meditation on the relationship of economic liberty to creative and poetic freedom. See also Judith Butler on Foucault, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Although Foucault criticizes those who celebrate the liberatory potential of *eros* uncritically, Butler believes his theory of sexuality reproduces “an unacknowledged emancipatory ideal” (127).

<sup>44</sup> See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011); bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, 1981 (New York: South End Press, 1999); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 1984 (New York: Crossing Press, 2007); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991); Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Luce Irigaray, *Key Writings* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).

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<sup>45</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 94-5.

<sup>46</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," in *The Freud Reader*, Ed. Peter Gay, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989, 677.

<sup>47</sup> In 2012, the Center for American Women and Politics reported that 93 out of 535 members of congress were women. See <http://www.politicalparity.org/research-inventory/womens-election-to-congress/>.

<sup>48</sup> See the American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2013 report *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences* (Cambridge: American Academy of Arts and Sciences): "There are various funding sources for humanistic and social scientific research, including state education and culture budgets, and private donors and philanthropies. All of these sources are scaling back their investments, but the federal disinvestment may be the most worrisome indicator. Federal research funding through the National Endowment for the Humanities, always a small fraction of the federal funding for science and engineering research, has been reduced disproportionately in recent years. The humanities and law were the only research fields in which the federal share of academic research expenditures was appreciably smaller in 2011 than six years earlier" (39). See also Tamar Lewin, "As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry," *New York Times*, October 30, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/education/as-interest-fades-in-the-humanities-colleges-worry.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/education/as-interest-fades-in-the-humanities-colleges-worry.html?_r=0) and White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, "Preparing a Twenty-First Century Workforce: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education (STEM) in the 2014 Budget," [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/2014\\_R&Dbudget\\_STEM.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/2014_R&Dbudget_STEM.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> Irigaray, 120.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), xi.

<sup>52</sup> Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, 2009, trans. Peter Bush (New York: New Press, 2012), 66.

<sup>53</sup> In Martha Nussbaum's introduction to *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013), she writes, "Sometimes people suppose that only fascist or aggressive societies are intensely emotional and that only such societies need to focus on the

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cultivation of emotions. Those beliefs are both mistaken and dangerous [...] Ceding the terrain of emotion-shaping to antiliberal forces gives them a huge advantage in the people's hearts and risks making people think of liberal values as tepid and boring" (2).

<sup>54</sup> Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1. Nine of the writers editors Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth collect in *The Affect Theory Reader* address themes of love as they explore a wide range of phenomena (including the pleasures of eating, feelings of shame, and "the material practices of glamour" (289-308)).

<sup>55</sup> Michael Hardt, "For Love or Money," *Cultural Anthropology*, 26.4 (2011), 678. doi: 10.1111/j.1548-1360.2011.01119.x.

<sup>56</sup> A look at the projects neuroscientists interested in the experience of romantic "love" gives a sense of this view. One consideration of the ethics of pharmaceuticals designed to produce or prevent feelings of love, "traces love's roots to the brain, and even to specific biochemical pathways modulated by various hormones and neurotransmitters. In 2008, two of the present authors (Savulescu and Sandberg) outlined a comprehensive argument for the 'neuroenhancement' of love and relationships, which focused on the potential use of biochemistry to help maintain authentic and well-suited relationship bonds that might otherwise needlessly break down." See Brian D. Earp, Olga A. Wudarczyk, Anders Sandberg, and Julian Savulescu, "If I Could Just Stop Loving You: Anti-Love Biotechnology and the Ethics of a Chemical Breakup," *The American Journal of Bioethics* 13.11 (2013): 3.

<sup>57</sup> See Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology*, 1938 (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1976).

<sup>58</sup> For critiques of New Criticism, see William V. Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) and Donald Pease and Robyn Weigman, eds., *The Futures of American Studies (New Americanists)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>59</sup> Brooks and Warren, "Letter to the Teacher," 1938.

<sup>60</sup> Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 11.

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<sup>61</sup> See Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!" *New Literary History*, 42.4 (Autumn 2011): 573-591, doi: 10.1353/nlh.2011.0045, for a recent and popular challenge to now commonplace new historical methods.

<sup>62</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 255.

<sup>63</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 573-74.

<sup>64</sup> Fish recently reported he had sold off all of his books because the "conversations [he] had participated in for decades have now gone in another direction." See "Moving On," *New York Times*, May 27, 2013, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/27/moving-on/#more-144719>.

<sup>65</sup> See T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harvest Books, 1975), 37-44, and Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Although Bloom has abandoned his Freudian roots in his recent work, he now devotes himself instead to explicitly gnostic philosophies. See, for instance, Harold Bloom, *Omens of Millenium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (New York: Riverhead, 1996).

<sup>66</sup> See Stanley Fish, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) and *Save The World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Fish recently went on record to defend his vision of disinterested criticism and to deny his critical practice is complicit with neoliberalism, which he says he learned about from critics of his approach. See Fish, "Neoliberalism and Higher Education," *New York Times*, March 8, 2009, [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/neoliberalism-and-higher-education/?\\_r=1](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/neoliberalism-and-higher-education/?_r=1).

<sup>67</sup> Peter Norberg, "Melville," *American Literary Scholarship* (2012), 33-49, doi 10.1215/00659142-2432291

<sup>68</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "political," 1a.

<sup>69</sup> One critic considers how Melville's texts engage with maritime law (Norberg, 39).



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<sup>70</sup> Norberg, 40. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “politics,” 4a. “Politics” denotes “actions concerned with the acquisition or exercise of power, status, or authority not necessarily related to the state or governance.”

<sup>71</sup> See Christopher Freeburg, *Melville and the Idea of Blackness: Race and Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Robert Azzarello’s *Queer Environmentality: Ecology, Evolution, and Sexuality* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012); and Richard Hardack, *‘Not All Together Human’: Pantheism and the Dark Nature of the American Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

<sup>72</sup> Hardack, 66.

<sup>73</sup> Azzarello, 4

<sup>74</sup> Freeburg, 4.

<sup>75</sup> See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Joseph A. Buttigieg, “The Contemporary Discourse on Civil Society: A Gramscian Critique,” *boundary 2* 32:1 (2005): 33-52; Paul A. Bové, “The End of Thinking: Intellectual Failure in the New World Order,” *A More Conservative Place: Intellectual Culture in the Bush Era* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press 2013); Jonathan Arac, “Imperial Eclecticism in *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Man*: Literature in a Postcolonial Empire,” *boundary 2* 37.3 (2010), 151-165; doi: 10.1215/01903659-2010-022.

<sup>76</sup> Scholars are increasingly interested in recovering little known writers who championed particular political causes, as the roundtable “Reflections on the Canon of American Poetry,” a panel at the American Literature Association’s 2014 conference, demonstrated. This impulse is a continuation of, but also differs from, important attempts to recover voices of marginalized writers, ongoing since the 1980s.

<sup>77</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 162.

<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, Van Wyck Brooks, *America’s Coming-of-Age* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1915); Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day: A Study in American Literature and Culture*, 1926

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(New York: Dover, 1968); F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. New York: Oxford UP, 1941.

<sup>79</sup> Compare contemporary reviews for 1855 *Leaves of Grass* with reviews for the 1881 edition. Even in 1881, Whitman faced censorship for what one reviewer called his “beastliness” (Detroit *Free Press*, 7 January 1882, in *Contemporary Reviews*, 248). Critics widely agreed that the 1881 edition was “milder,” and therefore preferable, to earlier editions (T.W. Higginson, “Recent Poetry,” *Nation* 33 (15 December 1881), in *Contemporary Reviews*). Many also drew attention to the fact that Whitman had finally secured in 1881 the support of “a reputable bookmaking house,” James R. Osgood and Company (Edward P. Mitchell, “Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the Future,” *New York Sun*, 19 November 1881, in *Contemporary Reviews*). The 1881 edition was censored, and some objected to its content and its free verse forms, but critical opinion of the poet’s morality generally softened in the last two decades of Whitman’s life. See these and other reviews in *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*.

<sup>80</sup> See Jose Marti, “The Poet Walt Whitman,” *Walt Whitman and the World*, eds. Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom, Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1995.

<sup>81</sup> See Thomas Mann, “On the German Republic,” 1922, *Modernism/modernity* 14.1 (January 2007): 109-132, accessed January 13, 2013, doi: 10.1353/mod.2007.0017.

<sup>82</sup> See D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 1924, New York: Penguin, 1971.

<sup>83</sup> See New York Times Editorial Board, “Israel Narrows its Democracy,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/25/opinion/israel-narrows-its-democracy.html>; Cayetana Alvarez de Toledo, Nuria Amat, and Mario Vargas Llosa, “A Threat to Spanish Democracy,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/08/opinion/a-threat-to-spanish-democracy.html>; Elizabeth Pisani, “Sore Losers Spite Indonesia’s Democracy,” *New York Times*, October 7 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/08/opinion/sore-losers-spite-indonesias-democracy.html>; Paul Krugman, “Plutocrats Against Democracy,” *New York Times*, October 23, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/24/opinion/paul-krugman-plutocrats-against-democracy.html?>; Tony Blair, “Is Democracy Dead?” *New York Times*, December 4, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/opinion/tony-blair-is-democracy-dead.html>.

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<sup>84</sup> Fukuyama makes a similar claim in a defense of his “end of history” thesis in the *Wall Street Journal*, and his new book, *Political Order and Political Decay* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014) ostensibly lambasts elite and special interests (Fukuyama includes both unions and corporations in this category) while maintaining capitalism is the only alternative. Authoritarian regimes administer life more efficiently, Fukuyama says, and so it is easy to understand why such emergent democracies as Turkey and Sri Lanka are “backsliding into authoritarian practices.” See “At the ‘End of History’ Still Stands Democracy,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 6, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/at-the-end-of-history-still-stands-democracy-1402080661>.

<sup>85</sup> For Blair, as for Fukuyama, this is as true for the world’s oldest republic as it is for Nicaragua or Iraq. Both argue hopelessly polarized partisans now obstruct basic democratic processes in the US. As Eric Cheyfitz recently demonstrated, however, this partisan bickering in fact conceals a stunning consensus in favor of elite interests and so signals the “collapse of the two-party system” in America. See Cheyfitz, “Disinformation: The Limits of Capitalism’s Imagination and the End of Ideology,” *boundary 2* 41.3 (Fall 2014): 55-91, accessed December 15, 2014, doi:10.1215/01903659-2812073.

<sup>86</sup> See Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 1776, New York: Penguin, 1982 and Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 1962, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

<sup>87</sup> See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*.

<sup>88</sup> See George Saunders’ horrifying story “Exhortation” (*Tenth of December*, New York: Random House, 2013) reminds us managers can apply the language of practical efficacy to any activity, including the administration of violence.

<sup>89</sup> See Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program,” December 3, 2014.

<sup>90</sup> See Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014.

<sup>91</sup> See Klein and Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014.

<sup>92</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “manage.”

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<sup>93</sup> See Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *Basic Writings*. Ed. David Farrell Krell, New York: HarperCollins, 1993, 307-342.

<sup>94</sup> Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Penguin, 2006) gives voice to an extreme version of the faith in technology that animates the US tech industry today.

<sup>95</sup> Klein argues this attitude creates precisely the ecological disasters innovation's acolytes believe technology can defuse. See her chapter "The Solution to Pollution is...Pollution?" in *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014.

<sup>96</sup> "Ecocritics" applaud the attitude toward nature at work in "Song of Myself" and queer studies scholars find in Whitman a significant voice for LGBTQA rights. See Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of the Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) and Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>97</sup> Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 249.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>99</sup> See Peter Coviello, "Intimate Nationality: Anonymity and Attachment in Whitman," *American Literature* 73.1 (March 2001): 85-119, accessed January 30, 2013, <http://muse.jsu.edu/journals/al/summary/v073/73.1coviello.html>. Bryan K. Garman, "'Heroic Spiritual Grandfather': Whitman, Sexuality, and the American Left, 1890-1940," *American Quarterly* 52.1 (March 2000): 90-126, accessed January 30, 2013, doi: 10.1353/aq.2000.0004; Andrew Lawson, "'Spending for Vast Returns': Sex, Class, and Commerce in the First *Leaves of Grass*," *American Literature* 75.2 (June 2003): 335-365, accessed January 30, 2013, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/al/summary/v075/75.2lawson.html>; David S. Reynolds, "'Affection shall solve every one of the problems of freedom': Calamus Love and the Antebellum Political Crisis," *Huntington Literary Quarterly* 73.4 (December 2010): 629-642, accessed January 29, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2010.73.4.629>; M. Wynn Thomas. "'Till I hit upon a name': 'Calamus' and the Language of Love," *Huntington Literary Quarterly* 73.4 (December 2010) 643-657, accessed January 29, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/hlq.2010.73.4.643>. Betsy Erkkila's essay, "Whitman and the

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Homosexual Republic” (*Walt Whitman: the Centennial Essays*. Ed. Ed Folsom. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994) is also important for this line of criticism.

<sup>100</sup> Maire Mullins, “Sexuality,” *A Companion to Walt Whitman*. Ed. Donald D. Kummings, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 164-5.

<sup>101</sup> See Paul Bové, “The End of Thinking: Intellectual Failure in the New World Order.” *A More Conservative Place: Intellectual Culture in the Bush Era*, Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2013; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Joseph A. Buttigieg, “The Contemporary Discourse on Civil Society: A Gramscian Critique,” *boundary 2* 32:1 (2005): 33-52; and Edward Said, “Reflections on American ‘Left’ Literary Criticism,” *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

<sup>102</sup> See Bové, *A More Conservative Place*.

<sup>103</sup> According to Moon, the literary is “subordinate” to such projects as “trying and inevitably failing to project actual physical presence in a text, and profoundly revising the culture’s prevailing modes of representing the consequences of embodiment” (8). Statements of this kind suggest Whitman regretted a book and a human body could not be made identical.

<sup>104</sup> Presumably, Moon here refers to the emergent conception of literature as “romance” such writers as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville invented in the mid-nineteenth century. Jonathan Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative: 1820-1860*, 1995 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>105</sup> I take all Whitman quotations from Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan, New York: Library of America, 1996. Print.

<sup>106</sup> See John Winthrop; Benjamin Franklin; Ralph Waldo Emerson.

<sup>107</sup> See Alfred J. Lopez (“Translating Interdisciplinarity: Reading Marti Reading Whitman,” *The Comparatist* 25 (2011): 5-18) for a summary of this view.

<sup>108</sup> President Obama’s recent speech at West Point, which suggests we use military action with care but defends the state’s basic right to do so, is a recent example:  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>.

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<sup>109</sup> Kierkegaard develops this vision of love in Christian terms in *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper, 1962). There, he argues we know love, itself insensible, by its fruits.

<sup>110</sup> This is one of the several significant ways Whitman differs from his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, who insists in “The American Scholar” and in “The Poet” that artists and intellectuals exist in antagonistic and autonomous relationship to the world and others.

<sup>111</sup> Feinstein, 2. See Mike Lofgren, “Anatomy of the Deep State,” *billmoyers.com*, February 21, 2014, <http://billmoyers.com/2014/02/21/anatomy-of-the-deep-state/>.

<sup>112</sup> Feinstein, 9.

<sup>113</sup> For a considered account of the effect of torture on the individual, and an account of the way a tradition of historical humanism has resisted such practices, see Paul A. Bové, *Poetry against Torture: Criticism, History, and the Human* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).

<sup>114</sup> See Propublica, “Everything We Know So Far about Drone Strikes,” <https://www.propublica.org/article/everything-we-know-so-far-about-drone-strikes>; Joe Becker and Scott Shane, “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Leadership and Will,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?pagewanted=all>; Steve Koll’s “The Unblinking Stare: The Drone War in Pakistan,” *The New Yorker*, November 24, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/24/unblinking-stare>.

<sup>115</sup> See Obama, “Speech on Drone Policy,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/us/politics/transcript-of-obamas-speech-on-drone-policy.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>116</sup> See, for instance, ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine: Steve Erlanger and Isabel Kirschner, “Israel and Hamas Trade Attacks as Tension Rises,” *New York Times*, July 8, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/09/world/middleeast/israel-steps-up-offensive-against-hamas-in-gaza.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C{%221%22%3A%22RI%3A11%22}&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/09/world/middleeast/israel-steps-up-offensive-against-hamas-in-gaza.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C{%221%22%3A%22RI%3A11%22}&_r=0). See also continuing violence between the Ukraine and Russia: Rick Lyman and Andrew E. Kramer, “War Is Exploding Anew in Ukraine; Rebels Vow More,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/24/world/europe/ukraine-violence.html>.; and the rise

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of ISIS: “Multiple Fronts in the Fight Against ISIS,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/06/12/world/middleeast/the-iraq-isis-conflict-in-maps-photos-and-video.html>.

<sup>117</sup> Balibar, 115.

<sup>118</sup> Balibar, 116.

<sup>119</sup> When the state kills Americans it argues are terrorists, it is clear these two categories are not always identical: “Obama, in a Shift, to Limit Targets of Drone Strikes,” *New York Times*, May 22, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/23/us/us-acknowledges-killing-4-americans-in-drone-strikes.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>120</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *Daily Telegraph*, May 22, 1980.

<sup>121</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, xii.

<sup>122</sup> Melville later regretted the piece. See Melville’s letter to Hawthorne, [17?] November 1851, in which Melville asks Hawthorne not to write a review of *Moby-Dick*, which Hawthorne privately praised, and apologizes for his own earlier response to *Mosses*: “Don’t write a word about the book...I am heartily sorry I ever wrote anything about you—it was paltry.” See Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth, Vol. 14 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, G. Thomas Tanselle, and Lynn Horth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1993), 213.

<sup>123</sup> Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*, in Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities; Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile; The Piazza Tales; The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade; Uncollected Prose; Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative*, notes by Harrison Hayford (New York: Library of America, 1984). A story’s “romance,” Melville’s cosmopolitan says, “is what contrasts it with real life.” Romance is “the invention...the fiction as opposed to the fact” (1042). See Jonathan Arac, ““A Romantic Book”” for an extended discussion of Melville and the romance as a form of literary writing that opened up a space for social and cultural critique in the mid-nineteenth-century US.

<sup>124</sup> Melville does not mention the range of economic and political barriers he felt literary writers faced in nineteenth-century America, but they inform many of the complaints he makes in his review of *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Primary among these barriers was the lack of an international copyright law that would encourage US publishers to take on and pay royalties to

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domestic writers, rather than simply reprinting works produced by writers in other nations. Melville identifies this problem in several letters to his English publisher, Richard Bentley. On 20 July 1849, discussing *Mardi*'s losses and *Redburn*'s prospects with Bentley, Melville hopes that "ere long, doubtless, we shall have something of an international [copyright] law—so much desired by all American writers..." (134).

<sup>125</sup> Melville, "Mosses," 1163.

<sup>126</sup> Melville, "Mosses," 1157.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 1158.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 1160.

<sup>129</sup> See William V. Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), for an explication of Melville's "truth" discourse in terms of twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger's recovery of the Greek *aletheia*, or "revealing," a notion of truth opposed to the positivist Roman *veritas* and commensurate with the brief, fleeting vision of truth Melville sketches in the review.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 1159. See

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 1150.

<sup>132</sup> Jonathan Arac situates this emergent literary function in the context of the historical debates and legal battles surrounding the notion of agency and rights (corporate and human) in antebellum America. See "'A Romantic Book:' *Moby-Dick* and Novel Agency," *boundary 2* 17.2 (1990): 40-59.

<sup>133</sup> Melville, "Mosses," 1159.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 1166.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 1167.

<sup>136</sup> Melville, "Mosses," 1167.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 1167. See Voloshin and Milder for these claims. As Voloshin points out, Melville would likely have read the work we now call Plato's *Symposium* in translation as *The Banquet*.

<sup>138</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "erotic," 2b.

<sup>139</sup> Melville, "Mosses," 1155.

<sup>140</sup> Melville, "Mosses," 1165.



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<sup>141</sup> In certain ways, Melville anticipates the beneficent relationship Henry James wanted between critics and writers. Henry James, "Criticism," in *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and Practice of Fiction*, edited by William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 232-256.

<sup>142</sup> Melville, "Mosses," 1165.

<sup>143</sup> Melville, "Mosses," 1164.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Melville read and admired Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, ed. Michael K. Goldberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>147</sup> Melville, "Mosses," 1170.

<sup>148</sup> Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker, eds., *Reviews of Pierre, Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 417-452.

<sup>149</sup> See Arac, "'A Romantic Book': *Moby-Dick* and Novel Agency," for a reading of Melville that identifies his project with US literature's emergent function as a space of critique in antebellum America. The function of the "romance" we identify with high literature today, Arac demonstrates, significantly differs from the popular forms beside which Melville's novels appeared.

<sup>150</sup> See Sam Otter, *Melville's Anatomies*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), for a reading of *Pierre* in the context of the sentimental novels contemporary with it, and Hester Blum, "'No Life You Have Known': Or, Melville's Contemporary Critics," *Leviathan* 13:1 (March 2011): 10-20, for a discussion of Melville's relation to other genres. These critics read Melville in relation to the sentimental novel, the adventure tale, and other popular genres of his moment. Both conclude that *Pierre* challenges but does not explode the conventions of genre. While Melville's novels certainly share certain stylistic and formal features with other popular genres, I argue here that Melville envisioned the project of literature differently than do these other conventional forms, and that he imagined significant consequences to follow from these differences.

<sup>151</sup> [N.P. Willis], review of *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, *New York Home Journal* (4 September 1852), in Higgins and Parker 1995, 436.

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<sup>152</sup> Review of *Pierre*, *Southern Literary Messenger* 18 (September 1852): 574-75, in Higgins and Parker 1995, 434.

<sup>153</sup> Melville inscribes *Pierre* to a personified Berkshires peak, “The Most Excellent Purple Majesty of Greylock,” who might “incline his hoary crown or no” to the book that honors him. See Sacvan Bercovitch, “*Pierre*, or the Ambiguities of American Literary History,” in *Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*. New York: Routledge, 1993. 246-306, for a reading of the irony, humor, and anti-European sentiment manifest in this dedication.

<sup>154</sup> Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, Vol. 1 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, G. Thomas Tanselle, and Lynn Horth. Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1992.

<sup>155</sup> Herman Melville, *Omoo*, Vol. 2 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, G. Thomas Tanselle, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1968).

<sup>156</sup> See the contemporary reviews for *Typee* (1-82) and *Omoo* (83-190) in Higgins and Parker 1995.

<sup>157</sup> See Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), for a comparison of Melville’s biographical experiences to his fiction. Embellishment transformed voyages that lasted weeks or months into epic adventures of months or years.

<sup>158</sup> Review of *Pierre*, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* 45 (October 1852), 390, in Higgins and Parker 1995, 440.

<sup>159</sup> [Evert Duyckinck], review of *Pierre*, *Literary World* 290 (21 August 1852), 118-120, in Higgins and Parker 1995, 430. Duyckinck’s ironic assessment of the novel prefigures the genuine reassessment critics made of Melville’s canon in the late twentieth century, when the view that Melville’s formal innovations anticipate certain modernist projects became ubiquitous. See Kingsley Widmer, “Melville and the Myths of Modernism,” in *A Companion to Melville Studies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 669-694, for a representative reading. See William V. Spanos, “*Pierre*’s Extraordinary Emergency: Melville and ‘the Voice of Silence,’ Part 1,” *boundary 2* 28.2 (Summer 2001) 105-131. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/b2/summary/v028/28.2spanos.html>), for a reading of *Pierre* as “a novel of social critique that,

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both in form and content, anticipates certain concerns about the politics of ontological representation that have become extremely important for late postmodernist theory and practice” (113).

<sup>160</sup> [Duyckinck,] 430.

<sup>161</sup> [Duyckinck,] 431.

<sup>162</sup> *Godey's*, 440. Some more recent critics of *Pierre* continue to share this view. Across long careers, late-twentieth-century Melville critics Hershel Parker and Brian Higgins argue that an angry Melville added all reference to authorship in *Pierre* after reading negative reviews for *Moby-Dick*, first by English and then by American critics. Consistent with the editorial, scholarly, and critical principles for practice Parker lays out in articles like “The Determinacy of the Creative Process and the ‘Authority’ of the Author's Textual Decisions,” *College Literature* 10.2 (Spring 1983): 99-125, which conceive of authorial intention as something that an editor can arrive at through archival research, Parker argues that all references to Pierre Glendinning as a writer should not be understood as part of the *Pierre* Melville first envisioned (see also Parker, “Why Pierre Went Wrong,” *Studies in the Novel* 8.2 (1976)). This view undergirds the decades-long project, the archival research behind which Higgins and Parker explicate in *Reading Melville's Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006) that culminated in Parker's *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities: The Kraken Edition*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1995). The *Kraken Edition* excises all reference to authorship and claims that “Melville's primary concern is psychosexual;” the book's opening, for instance, reflects “the sublimations of high-minded idealists like Pierre and Lucy who unknowingly and disguisingly diffuse sexual arousal into rapturous wonder at the beauty of the world and the power of love” (*Reading Pierre* 51). Unable to reconcile Melville's late “intention” with a speculative original intent Parker claims to access, Parker's critical project insists on the unity of the novel, which, for him, can only be demonstrated by constructing a teleological narrative of authorial experience. He takes a pen to history, as it were, to correct the events of Melville's biography and reestablish, after the fact, the proper conditions of composition that the events of the author's life occluded back in 1851.

<sup>163</sup> Review of *Pierre*, New York *Herald* (18 September 1852), in Higgins and Parker 1995, 439.

<sup>164</sup> Melville, *Pierre*, 198.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Baym, 919.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>169</sup> As noted above, Parker represents critics who take a staunchly psychological view of Melville.

<sup>170</sup> C.L.R. James mounts the most compelling and eloquent case against critics who read Melville as a psychological novelist. Although Melville “anticipated Freud by fifty years,” James writes, “Melville is no Freudian. In fact, he is today, more than ever, the deadliest enemy the Freudians have ever had, because for Melville this preoccupation with personality, this tendency to incest and homosexuality, was not human nature but a disease, a horrible sickness, rooted, as was the sickness of Ahab and Ishmael, in an unbearable sense of social crisis.” Though James addresses homosexuality in the language of “disease,” he identifies the social nature of Melville’s novels, which embed personal problems and experiences in broad social context. James recognized, too, that the personal “disorders” or “diseases” Melville depicted with such skill addressed “a special class of people, chiefly intellectuals and the idle rich who cannot decide what attitude they should take to a changing society.” Melville, James says, shows us society’s “tortured victims,” who “explode in the tendency to destruction, suicide, murder, and violence of all kinds which distinguish our age” (98).

<sup>171</sup> Melville, *Pierre*, 82.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>175</sup> Emerson was not affiliated with this broad and decentralized movement, but he accidentally coined the appellation in an 1844 address that celebrated technology and US industry in ways his other essays often criticized or questioned. See Yonatan Eyal, *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>176</sup> Most famously, Melville’s estranged friend and editor of New York’s *Literary World* Evert Duyckinck appears in caricature as “a joint editor of the ‘Captain Kidd Monthly,’” a bandit bent

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on obtaining the daguerreotype for which Pierre, like Melville himself, refuses to sit (*Pierre* 297).

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>180</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books*, edited by Rodger L. Tarr (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>181</sup> Melville, *Pierre*, 289.

<sup>182</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. Carlyle, whose book on heroes Melville borrowed from Evert Duyckinck in 1850 (likely in June or July, according to Sealts catalogue, available at <http://melvillemarginalia.org>), calls his heroic “man of letters” a “wild Ishmaelite.”

<sup>183</sup> Melville would have known him as the first translator of Rabelais. He borrowed Ozell’s update of this translation from Duyckinck’s library in 1848. <<http://melvillemarginalia.org>>.

<sup>184</sup> The press in the 1830s and 1840s portrayed Zadock Pratt as a type of American hero familiar to the popular cultural imagination. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Pratt had pulled himself up by his American bootstraps, performed against the British in the War of 1812, and become a self-made man, leader of industry, and elected official. He operated several large tanneries throughout New York State and served two non-consecutive terms as a Congressman known for his “efforts in making improvements in the public buildings at Washington,” according to *American Literary Magazine*, “Zadock Pratt,” (April 1848), 203-210.

<sup>185</sup> Melville’s few extant comments on Emerson derive from two surviving letters to Duyckinck, whose intermediate reply has been lost, and from the marginalia in Melville’s copy of Emerson’s essays. Melville’s novels, however, demonstrate a sophisticated engagement with and response to a contemporary he at once admired and regarded with an intellectual suspicion that sometimes deepened to outrage. Melville wrote of Emerson to Duyckinck, “I could readily see in Emerson, notwithstanding his merit, a gaping flaw. It was, the insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions. These men are all cracked right across the brow.” See Melville, *Correspondence*, 121.

<sup>186</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885.

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<sup>187</sup> Emerson, "American Scholar," 56.

<sup>188</sup> Emerson, "American Scholar," 56.

<sup>189</sup> *American Literary Magazine*, "Zadock Pratt," (April 1848), 203-210; *Democratic Review*, "Hon. Zadock Pratt," *Mechanic's Advocate*, March 18, 1847, 121; *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, "Article 5—Leather Manufacture," August 1840, 141-148. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/60211031>.

<sup>190</sup> Emerson, "American Scholar," 68.

<sup>191</sup> *American Literary Magazine*.

<sup>192</sup> *Hunt's*, 19.

<sup>193</sup> The village also disappeared as quickly after the tannery closed in 1846. Pratt had exhausted the supply of hemlock bark in the area necessary for his industrial processes.

<sup>194</sup> *American Literary Magazine*, 2.

<sup>195</sup> See Lucius F. Ellsworth, "Craft to National Industry in the Nineteenth Century: A Case Study of the Transformation of the New York State Tanning Industry," *The Journal of Economic History* 32.1 (March 1972): 399-402, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2117196>, for an historical account of Pratt and his industry in relation to changing modes of production in the US. Pratt's career represents significant changes to US modes of production and ways of life in the decades before Melville composed *The Ambiguities*. His success in business, for instance, resulted from the practical and mechanical expertise he developed, which made the conversion of (largely imported) hides to usable leather faster and more efficient. Across the US, manufacturing increased with domestic developments of this kind while consumption of European imports decreased, gradually altering the global economic landscape. With these changes, the US imagined itself and its relation to other nations differently; the rhetoric of "Young America" at once engendered and followed from such shifting industrial paradigms. More, updated industrial techniques like Pratt's transformed the shape and texture of American life, literally calling whole towns and villages into being around new industrial enterprises. Pratt's workers, he boasted to the American Institute of the City of New York, produced "about 1,000,000 sides of sole leather" over a twenty-year period "without ardent spirits" or thievery (*American Literary Magazine*). Through practical knowledge generated and deployed to organize, manage, and transform life, Pratt's intellectual activity created laboring subjects and organized communities as quickly and

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efficiently as it produced leather. Melville indicates that he imagines Pierre's career as a young writer to unfold fully in the context of these complex historical conditions.

<sup>196</sup> Emerson, "American Scholar," 59.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>199</sup> Emerson, "Love," 106.

<sup>200</sup> Emerson, "American Scholar," 59.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>203</sup> Many critics believe Emerson and Melville agree. Baym finds commonalities between Emerson's transcendental framework and the metaphysical assumptions she identifies with *Moby-Dick*, which, she argues, questions truth but upholds a faith in language *Pierre* loses. Baym's excellent essay conflates the hostility to fiction and materiality inherent in Emerson with Melville's poetics; Melville, she writes, "came to the same discovery that Pierre makes later in the book—that the profundity toward which literature ought to, indeed must, aspire if it is to be serious is an illusion because literature is inherently trivial" (919). This chapter disputes the longing for stable truth Baym's claims impart to Melville, whose work seems devoted to exposing the danger of such a project. Similarly, Wai-chee Dimock's *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, sees Melville's notion of the author as identical to Emerson's; the only difference, for her, is that Melville, as in *Pierre*, pushes what Emerson only intends in hyperbole into the realm of the literal. This does not, in her account, make Melville superior to Emerson; it makes him foolish.

<sup>204</sup> Emerson, "The Poet," 219.

<sup>205</sup> Melville understands all literary writers as "poets," whether they write "in prose or verse" ("Mosses," 1166).

<sup>206</sup> Emerson, "The Poet," 232.

<sup>207</sup> Melville, *Pierre*, 295.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 134.

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 329-30.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 352-3.

<sup>215</sup> Pierre's narrator overshadows his protagonist. This is also how Nina Baym ("Melville's Quarrel with Fiction." *PMLA* 94.5 (October 1979): 909-923, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/461973>) describes the narrative relation in Melville's novel. In *Pierre*, she writes, "Melville is not certain about what he ought to be doing but is absolutely certain that he does not want to be doing it. Not only does the narrator convey an acute if unfocused satisfaction. The commentary about his writing, his obligations as a storyteller, and the literary quality of his performance has had the effect of turning the subject from the tale to the teller" (919). Melville, however, does not conceive of his literary project as Pierre does. Baym associates many of the formal elements I later identify with the positive features of Melville's poetics—a changing, affective relationship between narrator and subject, a tendency to expose narrative motives, etc.—with the same confusion Matthiessen and Mumford find in the text.

<sup>216</sup> Melville, *Pierre*, 353.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>218</sup> *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder, Attorney General*, US 570 (2013).

<sup>219</sup> When Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg read the dissenting opinion, she agreed the *Voting Rights Act* had been successful and argued it should therefore remain in full effect. The vote was 5-4.

<sup>220</sup> Roberts, "Opinion of the Court," *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder, Attorney General*, US 570 (2013), 1.

<sup>221</sup> Lizette Alvarez and Cara Buckley, "Zimmerman Is Acquitted in Killing of Trayvon Martin," *New York Times*, July 14, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/15/us/george-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>222</sup> See Yancy and Butler, [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/?_r=0).

<sup>223</sup> Jean Toomer, "Reflections of the Race Riots," in *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History*, by Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1998), 226.



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<sup>224</sup> See Piketty.

<sup>225</sup> Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal*, 15.

<sup>226</sup> Conservatives make sense of contemporary race violence in several familiar ways and propose several familiar solutions. For instance, the right argues the left has produced attitudes of “victimhood and dependency” among the poor, as Fox News has put it. They claim this mentality fueled the Ferguson protests. Fox News and other conservative media outlets thus propose, as the right has at least since the 1960s, that we can counter race violence and disenfranchisement in the US by further dismantling the welfare state, which encourages entitlement. See Tammy Bruce, “Ferguson Unrest: Obama, Dems Fan Flames of Racial Tension, Ignore Own Failed Economics,” *Fox News*, December 1, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2014/12/01/ferguson-unrest-obama-dems-fan-flames-racial-tension-ignore-own-failed/>.

<sup>227</sup> Dr. John L. Lott, Jr., “Ferguson: Obama Continues to Undermine Police Departments Across the Country,” *Fox News*, December 3, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2014/12/03/ferguson-obama-continues-to-undermine-police-departments-around-country/>.

<sup>228</sup> Scruggs and VanDemarr, 7.

<sup>229</sup> See, for instance, Genevieve Fabre and Michel Feith, eds. *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance* and essays excerpted in Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds, *Cane*, by Jean Toomer (New York: WW Norton & Co, 2011), especially: Barbara Foley, “Jean Toomer’s Washington and the Politics of Class: From Blue Veins to Seventh-street Rebels” (305-312); Byrd and Gates introduction “Song of the Son: The Emergence and Passing of Jean Toomer” (xix-lxv); Mark Whalan, “Jean Toomer and the Avant-Garde” (377-386); David Bradley, “Looking Behind *Cane*” (265-277); Charles T. Davis, “Jean Toomer and the South: Region and Race as Elements within a Literary Imagination” (234-246).

<sup>230</sup> For Scruggs and VanDemarr, the conclusion of “Kabnis” indicates Toomer knows “the future of African-Americans lies with the black masses” and understands “that the artist could never make an American identity whole again, could never return the world to the state of innocence before the Fall” (206-7). Scruggs and VanDemarr seem to treat Toomer’s abandonment of his

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idealist commitment to art as good reason to turn away from any commitment to art or imaginative activity. If art cannot restore identity and innocence, it deserves to be abandoned.

<sup>231</sup> Jean Toomer, "The Negro Emergent," in *A Jean Toomer Reader: Select Unpublished Writings*, ed. Frederik L. Rusch, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 88-89.

Rusch dates the essay 1924(?).

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 89

<sup>233</sup> Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh only keeps one of Frank's volumes in the stacks (*Re-discovery of America*). Studies devoted to *Cane* and Toomer, meanwhile, multiply on the shelves. Most of Frank's books are out of print, while new editions of *Cane* appear regularly (Norton 1969, 1989, 2011; Liveright 2011). Databases searches (*JStor*, *Project Muse*) for "Waldo Frank" first turn up articles on Frank's connection to Toomer.

<sup>234</sup> Frank Kermode, *Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 112.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>236</sup> Since Toomer published *Cane* in 1923, its erotic motifs have seemed to critics fundamental to the nature of its achievement. Early reviewers W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke grounded in *Cane*'s sensual subject matter Toomer's contribution to the "younger literary movement" of African American writers with whom they grouped him: "Jean Toomer is the first of our writers to hurl his pen across the very face of our sex conventionality." For Du Bois and Locke, Toomer confronts the "contradiction" between "straight-laced and conventional thought...within the Negro World" and "the very unconventional acts of the group" (184), a paradox Du Bois and Locke both connect in their own work to what Du Bois calls "the shadow of vast despair" cast by "prejudice" (368). More recent assessments read the historical and literary significance of Toomer's erotic book through the lens of identity discourses. Some argue *Cane* is a liberating text that challenges conventional views of race and gender. In "Jean Toomer's *Cane* and the Erotics of Mourning," for instance, Jennifer D. Williams, argues *Cane* challenges both a "history of sexualized racism" (96) and male "interpretive authority over female embodiment" (93). Other readers argue the text reinforces dominant and disempowering views of race, gender, and sexuality.

<sup>237</sup> As Barbara Foley writes, "artistic creation" is "a male preserve" for Toomer, and his narrators "invite the reader to be complicit in a self-absorbed and self-consciously artistic male gaze"

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(“Forward,” in *Letters*, xi). In the introduction to Toomer’s correspondence of the *Cane* years, Mark Whalan says some of Toomer’s letters “indicate much about Toomer’s views of women and tendency toward condescension.”

<sup>238</sup> “The loneliness of the men of genius of our time,” Toomer writes to Lewis Mumford, “is surely one of the tragic features of modern life.” In a letter to his lover Margaret Naumberg, Frank’s wife, Toomer worries about the distance that separates the genius from the people: “The mass, distrusting on the economic plane any leadership other than their own, have carried this attitude, quite naturally and in many cases with a limited justice, into those phases of life where the pure intellect and spirit are concerned. Thus, along with economic self-government, they will more and more tend to a worker’s science and art, and a proletarian philosophy. The question is: will these values at any point coincide with those of individual genius. If so, then the genius will still have an immediate social function. If not, genius will become a cast, removed from temporal happening, and democratically ostracized.” Toomer to Margaret Naumberg, August 2, 1923, *Letters*, 168.

<sup>239</sup> Tanner, 76-77. Jonathan Arac also notes this tension in the English tradition. The “English critic William Hazlitt,” Arac writes, “worried that the ‘power’ of the greatest writing might be at one with the ‘power’ of autocratic politics.” Arac, *Emergence*, 134-5.

<sup>240</sup> The need to differentiate sensuous aesthetic experience from other modes of sensuous experience, among them sex and romantic love for another human subject, is central to the history of modern aesthetics, as Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* signals. Kant claims aesthetic experiences differ from other sensuous experiences because they are “disinterested.” For Toomer, who confronts a similar problem as he conceives the powers and limits of the artist’s special activity, the artist is profoundly interested in the sensuous objects he encounters, but this interest is different in kind from the interests of other men.

<sup>241</sup> Toomer to Georgia Douglas Johnson, 7 January 1920, *Letters*, 5.

<sup>242</sup> Toomer, “Reflections of an Earth-Being,” in *The Wayward and the Seeking*, ed. Darwin T. Turner (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1980), 19.

<sup>243</sup> All Toomer criticism addresses his “identity” as a biracial American writer who moved between “black” and “white” worlds. Otherwise, Toomer criticism falls broadly into two primary categories. Critics, scholars and biographers evaluate the “spiritual” and “idealist” themes

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Toomer pursues, often in tandem with biographical and psychological analysis. See the paradigmatic biography by Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987). See Robert B. Jones, *Jean Toomer and the Prison-House of Thought: A Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 1993), for the most thorough study of Toomer's transcendental and metaphysical thinking. The other common critical approach aims to situate Toomer's literary writing in its historical, social and political contexts. See Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr, *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Genevieve Fabre and Michel Feith, eds. *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Karen Jackson Ford, *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005); Eds. Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Cane: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 2011). See Therman B. O'Daniel, ed. *Jean Toomer: A Critical Evaluation* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1988), for a variety of approaches.

<sup>244</sup> *Cane*, 19.

<sup>245</sup> See Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>246</sup> Toomer, "Avey," *Cane*, 48.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>251</sup> See Arac, *Emergence*, for an account of the development of this conception of literary activity in the nineteenth century.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>255</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age*, 31.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 58. Toomer read Brooks' *Letters and Leadership*, a 1918 collection of Brooks' contributions to Frank's journal *Seven Arts*, in the fall of 1922 (Toomer to Frank, [22 October 1922], *Letters*, 89. In it, Brooks touches again many of the themes that organize *America's Coming-of-Age*—his call for an American criticism that finds in literary works by US writers a “usable past,” his double critique of transcendentalism and pragmatism, and his challenge to contemporary critics and poets to produce vital and original work. Frank adapted the figures of the Puritan and the pioneer in *Our America*, the book that inspired Toomer to write more than any other, and Toomer's letters indicate he adapted Frank's terms for his own purposes. At work on *Cane*, Toomer wrote to Frank: “I cannot think of myself as being separated from you in the dual task of creating an American literature, and of developing a public, however large or small, capable of responding to our creations.” 22 August 1922, *Letters*, 59.

<sup>259</sup> Waldo Frank, *Our America*, (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 230.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid. 8-9.

<sup>261</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>262</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, in *Complete Works*.

<sup>263</sup> Munson wrote of “Fern”: “I do not...feel enthusiastic about your story in the *Little Review*...I felt that you did convey a quality in your portrait, but I did not like the Andersonian touches. The constant appeals to the reader I felt broke up your design, destroyed that self-operating objectivity I like in literature, and sometimes were pure wastage.” (Munson to Toomer, 22 February 1923, quoted in *Letters*, 135, n2). These “constant appeals to the reader” achieve an effect that forecloses the possibility of the “objectivity” Munson wants to see. And although Munson calls these “Andersonian touches,” “Fern” contributes to the substantial difference between *Cane* as a whole and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, a book Toomer at once admired and thought limited: “[T]here is not enough meat in Anderson,” Toomer wrote to Waldo Frank (November 1922, *Letters*, 97). In contrast to Anderson, who maintains a single narrative perspective throughout his short story cycle, Toomer experiments with a variety of forms in *Cane* and refuses to fix the relationship of the writer to his material.

<sup>264</sup> Toomer read many of Burke's early literary reviews in magazines and journals, and he often disagreed with him, especially when Burke criticized Frank's idealism (see note 78, below). This

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antagonism is on display in a letter Toomer wrote to Burke shortly before he left to study with Gurdjieff in France. Toomer asked several friends, including Alfred Stieglitz, to define “experience.” Burke’s answer dissatisfied him: “I cannot accept your line: Wisdom is the circle we take in getting back to the starting point. [...] Now, Ken, damn all this wordiness and specious mentalism” ([early May 1924], *Letters*, 199). Despite this, Toomer’s writing supports some of Burke’s insights into the questions of idealism, art, and experience Toomer pursued. For a study of their similar approaches to history and their differences from Waldo Frank, see Charles Scruggs, “Jean Toomer and Kenneth Burke and the Persistence of the Past,” *American Literary History* 13.1 (Spring 2001): 41-66. Accessed January 25, 2014. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/alh/summary/v013/13.1scruggs.html>.

<sup>265</sup> Burke, “Realism and Idealism,” 97.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Jean Toomer, *Cane*, 1923, eds. Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: WW Norton & Co, 2011), 81.

<sup>269</sup> This verse echoes and transforms “Deep River.” Compare with the refrain “Deep River, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.” James Weldon Johnson, ed. *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*. 1925. New York: De Capo, 1969. Print.

<sup>270</sup> Toomer, *Cane*, 81.

<sup>271</sup> Toomer, *Cane*, 83.

<sup>272</sup> Toomer, “Kabnis,” *Cane*, 106.

<sup>273</sup> Scruggs and VanDemarr, 206.

<sup>274</sup> Toomer, “Kabnis,” *Cane*, 109.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>276</sup> Toomer, “The Negro Emergent,” 87.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>281</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “soul,” I.6a(b), accessed January 25, 2014.

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid., s.v. “soul” I.3c.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., s.v. “soul” II.7a.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., s.v. “soul” II.7b.

<sup>285</sup> “But expression,” Burke writes in “The Consequences of Idealism,” “is not all of art; the rest is elegance” (23).

<sup>286</sup> Lewis Mumford, Review of *Rahab*, by Waldo Frank, *The New Republic* (August 16, 1922), 340, accessed January 25, 2014.

<sup>287</sup> Toomer, “Kabnis,” *Cane*, 109.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Toomer to Frank, [4 October 1922], *Letters*, 79-81. Frank sent Toomer Burke’s review “The Consequences of Idealism” while Toomer was preparing his own essay on Frank. “It will help you,” Frank wrote, perhaps to counter Burke’s “flat” reading, willfully inattentive to Frank’s “content.” See Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank, *Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank*, ed. Kathleen Pfeiffer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 65. Toomer replied to Frank’s letter with a defense of Frank’s work and a critique of Burke. Burke might be “earnest and reasonable,” but “if one feels that he fails to see the spiritual validity behind what may appear to him as a physical distortion [...], well, one disagrees, quite within one’s temper, and thats [sic] about all there is to it.” In his review, Burke distinguishes Frank’s expressionism from Mallarme’s poetics. Both offer a “distortion” of reality, he says, but Mallarme presents his distortion as such, while Frank presents his as the “truth.”

<sup>290</sup> Kenneth Burke, “The Consequences of Idealism,” 22-23.

<sup>291</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Toomer satirizes this intellectual position when Hanby discharges Kabnis. His school’s “purpose,” Hanby says, “is to teach our youth to live better, cleaner, more noble lives. To prove to the world that the Negro race can be just like any other race. It hopes to attain this aim partly by the salutary examples set by its instructors. I cannot hinder the progress of the race simply to indulge a single member.” Hanby cannot indulge behaviors that do not conform to conservative, bourgeois values. *Cane*, 93.

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<sup>294</sup> Lewis' account of his conversation with local Blodson explains why: "[...] what he found queer, I think, was not my opinions, but my lack of them. In half an hour he had settled everything: boll weevils, God, the World War. Weevils and wars are the pests God sends against the sinful. People are too weak to correct themselves: the Redeemer is coming back. Get ready, ye sinners, for the advent of Our Lord. Interesting, eh, Kabnis? but not exactly what we want." Toomer, "Kabnis," *Cane*, 99.

<sup>295</sup> Quoted in *Letters*, 188. Toomer to Montgomery Gregory, 2 January 1924.

<sup>296</sup> Toomer, "Kabnis," *Cane*, 110.

<sup>297</sup> For one account of the emergence of the US as a world power, Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994).

<sup>298</sup> Wallace Stevens, "The Men That Are Falling," *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 174 (hereafter cited as *CPP*).

<sup>299</sup> Stevens to Hi Simons, 12 January 1943, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 434 (hereafter cited as *L*).

<sup>300</sup> Stevens used Benjamin Jowett's translation of *Phaedrus* in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Unless otherwise indicated, I refer to this translation. Because no complete list of Stevens' books exists—Elsie Stevens sold off much of his library following the poet's death—scholars are not certain of the editions of Plato he read and owned.

<sup>301</sup> Stevens composed "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" in 1940 and published it in an anthology of *New Poems: 1940*, which appeared in 1941. Stevens' letters show he reviewed the proofs for this poem around the same time he wrote to Henry Church of his plans for "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" in January 1941 (*L* 386). The essay opens with Plato's figure of the soul from *Phaedrus*, and the fact that Stevens includes the essay's title and a brief note on its main theme in his letter to Church suggests ongoing engagement with Plato's figure. By May 1941, Stevens had completed the essay and delivered it at as a lecture at Princeton (*L* 392). "The Noble Rider" already contains the language of "supreme fictions." A letter in December of the same year, to Katherine Frazier at the Cummington Press (*L* 406), suggests he already had in mind what would become *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. By May



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of 1942, he wrote to the press that he had completed two of the poem's three sections, and Cummington brought out the *Notes* in October 1942 (CPP 972).

<sup>302</sup> See Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*, Louisiana State UP: Baton Rouge, 1965. For Riddel, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* builds upon the increasingly abstract *Parts of a World* and "brings Stevens fully into the late phase of 'introspective exile'..." (165). In Helen Vendler's study of the long poems, *On Extended Wing*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, 1969, Stevens is at last "freed into equilibrium" in *Notes*; he is "released from protesting too much," as in *Harmonium*, and he can in the middle period "vest himself in easier language and motion" (169). Harold Bloom dates Stevens' "major period" 1942 to his death in 1955 (See *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1976, 168). Others see *Notes* as no less a turn, but for not for the better. Lee M. Jenkins more recent monograph, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2000, echoes Randall Jarrell's early claim that *Harmonium* is happily populated by interesting characters, while the late abstractions Stevens develops in and after the *Notes* take on a controlled, overmastered, and "increasingly monologic quality" (90).

<sup>303</sup> These are the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium*, and the *Lysis*. One might include the *Ion*. Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.

<sup>304</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, in *Complete Works*, trans A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 206a, 489.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 207a, 490.

<sup>306</sup> "For among animals the principle is the same as with us, and mortal nature seeks so far as possible to live forever and be immortal." *Ibid.*, 207d, 490.

<sup>307</sup> From "On the Morals of the Christian Church" (20.37). In *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), Augustine explains that this hateful rejection of the things of this world grows in him out of the anguish he felt at the death of a beloved friend (61).

<sup>308</sup> See Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (New York: Grove Press, 1960); Riddel (27, 34); and the early essay Stevens read before it went to print, John Malcolm Brinnin, "Plato, Phoebus, and the Man from Hartford," *Voices: A Journal of Poetry* 121 (Spring 1945): 30-7.

<sup>309</sup> Helen Vendler calls Stevens' "scenes of instruction" "didactic." "'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction': Allegorical Personae." *Wallace Stevens Journal*. 17.2 (1993): 147-61, 153.

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<sup>310</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, (New York: Liveright, 1970) and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Cape and Harrison, 1930). Freud describes the development of his theory of *Eros* (and its counter-force, *Thanatos*) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1930): “With the hypothesis of narcissistic libido and the extension of the concept of libido to the individual cells, the sexual instinct was transformed for us into Eros, which seeks to force together the portions of living substance. What are commonly called the sexual instincts are looked upon by us as the part of Eros which is directed toward objects. Our speculations have suggested that Eros operates from the beginning of life and appears as a ‘life instinct’ in opposition to the ‘death instinct’ which was brought into being by the coming to life of inorganic substances. These speculations seek to solve the riddle of life by supposing that these two instincts were struggling with each other from the very first.” Had Stevens been familiar with this text, or with *Civilization and its Discontents*—and there is no evidence he was or was not (he cites *Future of an Illusion* in “The Noble Rider,” where Freud appears to champion illusion-free reality and so to “cut poetry’s throat” (651))—Stevens might have found Freud’s narrative of *Eros* and *Thanatos* a great instance of imagination. See “Imagination as Value” and “The Noble Rider” (*CPP*) for Stevens’ references to Freud in prose. See Stevens to Ronald Lane Latimer, 10 January 1936: “[T]here is the theory that writing poetry is a sexual activity,” a theory Stevens attributes vaguely to Freud and implies is not to be believed (*L* 306): . William Carlos Williams will say something similar in his later autobiography (1948): “Sex is at the bottom of all art....multiplicity, the male and the female....acting together, the fecundating principle” (373), though he seems in this closer to Stevens than to Freud.

<sup>311</sup> See poems recently collected in Mina Loy, *Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger L. Conover, (New York: FSG, 1996).

<sup>312</sup> See Hart Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, ed. Langdon Hammer, (New York: Lib. of America, 2006).

<sup>313</sup> See, for instance, the early Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives*, (New York: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>314</sup> See especially Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), *Notes on Thought and Vision & The Wise Sappho*, (San Francisco, 1982) and *Trilogy* (New York: New Directions, 1998). H.D. makes an interesting counterpoint to Stevens. As engaged with Plato’s erotic thought, her poetry is at once more

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radical in its affirmation of the female body and less radical in its conservative overtures to myth (at least in the early work). In *Notes on Thought and Vision*, she writes what Stevens knew: “Socrates’ whole doctrine of vision was a doctrine of love. We must be “in love” before we can understand the mysteries of vision” (22).

<sup>315</sup> Because the history of *Eros* joins under the principle of making and desiring creation both sex and art, this list might expand almost indefinitely. Among early-twentieth century poets of other language traditions, it would include Paul Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke, the Dadaists (who eroticized accident as a creative force), and many others. The fascist F.T. Marinetti and his futurists were perhaps unique in associating art, not with creative *Eros*, but with destruction.

<sup>316</sup> Stevens, *CPP*, 643.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>318</sup> See Bloom; Riddel; Kermode; Paul A. Bové, *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980).

<sup>319</sup> Wallace Stevens, “Imagination as Value,” in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, *CPP* 730.

<sup>320</sup> Stevens, “The Noble Rider” *CPP*, 659.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 661.

<sup>322</sup> Helen Vendler’s recent exchange with Rita Dove in the *New York Review of Books* suggests that Stevens’ place in the canon of twentieth-century poetry has not been finally established. See Helen Vendler, “Are These Poems to Remember?”, review of *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry*, ed. Rita Dove, *New York Review of Books*, 24 November 2011, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/nov/24/are-these-poems-remember/> and Rita Dove, “Defending an Anthology,” response to Helen Vendler, *New York Review of Books*, 22 December 2011, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/dec/22/defending-anthology/>

<sup>323</sup> Stevens to Hi Simons, 18 February 1942, *L* 402.

<sup>324</sup> The society that preserves Stevens’ memory in Hartford, Connecticut, where he lived with his wife and daughter, worked for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, and wrote poetry most of his adult life, calls itself “Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens.”

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<sup>325</sup> Three recent monographs on Stevens open with Riddel's concerns. Lee Margaret Jenkins, *Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order* (2000) quotes his formulation in her opening paragraph, while Bart Eeckhout, in *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2002) and Stefan Holander, in *Wallace Stevens and the Realities of Poetic Language* (New York: Routledge, 2008) address in their introductions the same feature of the criticism. All of these monographs begin by acknowledging and introducing attempts to wrestle with a by now long and contradictory "industry" of academic work on Stevens.

<sup>326</sup> Joseph Riddel, "The Climate of Our Poems," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 7.3/4 (1983): 59-75 (60).

<sup>327</sup> Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976).

<sup>328</sup> J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens," in *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard U, 1966).

<sup>329</sup> See Bové.

<sup>330</sup> Frank Lentricchia, "Writing After Hours," *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988). Lentricchia is not a "New Historicist," but he makes use of its methodologies in this essay when he attempts to recover the historical and political context Stevens' poetry seems to him to suppress.

<sup>331</sup> Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003).

<sup>332</sup> See Bloom.

<sup>333</sup> See Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

<sup>334</sup> See Lentricchia.

<sup>335</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" *New Literary History*, 13.3, Theory: Parodies, Puzzles, Paradigms (Spring 1982).

<sup>336</sup> Vendler and Bloom both return to Stevens in recent works that take up themes of mortality and age. Vendler returns to questions of truth across Stevens' whole career in a long essay in *Last Looks, Last Books: Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merrill*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. Bloom gives the Hartford poet a brief but bombastic nod in *Till I End My Song: A*

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*Gathering of Last Poems* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010); Stevens, he writes there, is “perhaps the greatest poet since Walt Whitman” (229). He also gives Stevens sustained attention in his recent *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>337</sup> Stanley Burnshaw, “Turmoil in the Middle Ground,” *The New Masses*, 1 October 1935, 42, reprinted with Burnshaw’s essay “Stevens’ ‘Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,’” in *A Stanley Burnshaw Reader* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1990) 21-32.

<sup>338</sup> See Stevens, “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,” in *Owl’s Clover* (1936), *CPP*, 570. Stevens removed this title and the poem’s oblique reference to the substance Burnshaw’s review in the *New Masses* when he revised *Owl’s Clover* for subsequent editions.

<sup>339</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “Program Three: Conversation with Charles Bernstein,” interview by Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening*, Art International Radio, 11 November 2009, <http://marjorieperloff.com/2009/12/16/close-listening/>.

<sup>340</sup> Many critics understand Stevens this way. See, among others, J. Hillis Miller, Paul Bové, and Joseph Riddel.

<sup>341</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Complete Works*, 533 (256a).

<sup>342</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans Jowett (271d).

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, (247c).

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, (266b).

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, (276e).

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, (276e-277a).

<sup>347</sup> Stevens, “The Noble Rider,” *CPP*, 664.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 664.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 665.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, 644.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 665.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 644.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 658.

<sup>354</sup> See *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Ion*, and others, in Plato, *Complete Works*.

<sup>355</sup> Plato, *Republic*, *Complete Works*, 597, 1201-2.

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<sup>356</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Jowett. A more recent translation, in Plato, *Complete Works*, reads this way: “To describe what the soul actually is would require a very long account, altogether a task for a god in every way; but to say what it is like is humanly possible and takes less time. So let us do the second in our speech. Let us then liken the soul to the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer”

<sup>357</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Jowett (266b).

<sup>358</sup> The observation is by now commonplace, and Stevens is one important precursor to the poststructuralist theorists and philosophers (Derrida, for instance) of the late-twentieth century.

<sup>359</sup> Harold Bloom also identifies Keats as Stevens’ reference here. See *Poems of Our Climate*, 150.

<sup>360</sup> John Keats. “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” In *John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley: Complete Poetical Works*. New York: Modern Library, 1832. 186.

<sup>361</sup> Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, 151.

<sup>362</sup> Stevens, “The Noble Rider,” *CPP*, 662-3.

<sup>363</sup> Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, *CPP*, 333.

<sup>364</sup> Stevens to Hi Simons, 12 January 1943 (*L* 435).

<sup>365</sup> Stevens to Henry Church, 8 December 1942 (*L* 431). In the same letter, Stevens reports a conversation about the book with “a student at Trinity College” who visited him at the office. “We talked about this book [*Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*]. I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction. The student said that that was an impossibility, that there was no such thing as believing in something that one knew was not true. It is obvious, however, that we are doing that all the time” (*L* 430).

<sup>366</sup> As late in Stevens’ life as December 28, 1954, he wrote of the *Notes* to Robert Pack: “we are dealing with poetry, not with philosophy. The last thing in the world I should want to do would be to formulate a system.”

<sup>367</sup> “In principle,” Stevens wrote to Simons, “there appear to be certain characteristics of a supreme fiction and the *NOTES* is confined to a statement of a few of those characteristics.” 12 January 1943 (*L* 435). Emphasis in original.

<sup>368</sup> *L* 430.

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<sup>369</sup> L 435.

<sup>370</sup> Stevens, *Concerning a Chair of Poetry, Uncollected Prose, CPP*, 806. The line “Thou art not August...” also appears in “Asides on an Oboe,” *CPP*, 226.

<sup>371</sup> See Charles Altieri, *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity*, for an extended treatment of Stevens’ use of similes, especially Chapter 4, “How Stevens Uses the Grammar of *As*” (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2013). Altieri claims Stevens’ use of “as” “clarif[ies] why he insisted that there could be a modern poetry that did not rely on the image but could extend the powers of discursive thinking by scrutinizing the affective energies it could elicit” and helps him to “develo[p] material for undermining the authority of the copulative verbs on which so much empiricist thinking on values is based” (116).

<sup>372</sup> Kermode, *Wallace Stevens*, 113.

<sup>373</sup> Stevens, “The Noble Rider,” *CPP*, 661.

<sup>374</sup> When Stevens affirms change, Kermode says, he “sets up against Platonism” a “precious physical reality” the constant transformation of which “renders obsolete heaven and hell, the myths and the gods” (114). See also J. Hillis Miller.

<sup>375</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary online*, s.v. “abstract,” accessed October 2, 2013. Two primary senses, each of which emphasizes a different movement of thought and speech, come together under the various shades “abstract” organizes, as Kermode indicates. *OED*’s current entry for the adjective (revised in 2011), derived from the Latin *abstractus*, first opposes “abstract” to “concrete.” When “abstract” describes a “word,” that word “denot[es] an idea, quality, or state rather than a concrete object” (*OED* “abstract” *adj.* 1a). More broadly, “abstract” describes what is “conceptual,” “existing in thought or as an idea but not having a physical or concrete existence,”<sup>375</sup> (*OED* “abstract” *adj.* 1b), or “theoretical,” that which is “not restricted to particular instances or concerned with the details of specific examples; dealing with or describing things at a general level, or in terms of concepts which denote general properties” (*OED* “abstract” *adj.* 1d). These evoke the shade of “formlessness” and immateriality Stevens activates when he tells Church “I have no idea what form that a supreme fiction would take. The NOTES start out with the idea that it would not take any form: that it would be abstract.” Slightly different is the sense that distinguishes general and specific properties, which shows the genealogical link between the work of abstraction and the Platonic idealist tradition. The

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“abstract” is also that which is “considered or understood without reference to particular instances or concrete examples; representing the intrinsic, general properties of something in isolation from the peculiar properties of any specific instance or example; (esp. in early use) spec. constituting an ideal form or hypothetical perfect version” (*OED* “abstract” *adj.* 1c). This entry resembles one Stevens might have encountered if the 1900 edition of *Webster’s Dictionary* was the “old-fashioned” one he often consulted at his Hartford Indemnity offices: “Considered apart from any application to a particular object; separated from matter; existing in the mind only; as **abstract** truth, **abstract** numbers; as, honesty is an **abstract** word” (<http://www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/abstract>). Stevens calls the Hartford’s *Webster’s* “old-fashioned” in a letter, but does not include the edition. The 1913 edition reprinted *Webster’s International Dictionary* of 1900 under the title *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary*. At home, Stevens writes, he used an *Oxford Concise Dictionary* (edition unknown). If necessary, he sent “someone” to look at the *Oxford English Dictionary* “in the State Library” (Stevens to Bernard Heringman, 21 November 1950, *L* 698). All of these senses accentuate the generalizing, unifying movement of abstraction, which collects scattered particularities and moves beyond them to articulate a unified whole or concept. Such movement resonates with the first dialectical process of which Socrates calls himself a lover, “generalization,” or “the comprehension of scattered particulars in one idea.”

<sup>376</sup> Entries for “abstract” in previous editions of the *OED* (1989) and in *Webster’s* open with the other dominant shade of “abstract,” to divide or “withdraw.” Although the *OED* indicates it is now rarely intended when the word is a descriptor, the adjectival forms just cited preserve some of this sense (*OED* “abstract” *adj.* 5). Acts of reduction and removal attend the word, and contemporary entries preserve this sense as primary for both the noun and verb forms. Foremost under the verb entry, to “abstract” is “to take away, extract, or remove (something); to move (a person or thing) away, withdraw.” It is to separate, a sense maintained from the Latin, as well as to summarize or abridge. If a noun, it can name a text produced by these limiting processes. Stevens seems to have this negative or detaching movement in mind when he pairs the verb in “The Noble Rider” with “withdraw.” The poet must “abstract himself” from the pressures of reality, Stevens writes, and “withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist” (“The Noble Rider,” *CPP*, 657). These senses emphasize processes of



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deletion and exclusion similar to the principle of “division into species according to the natural formation” also central to Socrates’ beloved dialectic.

<sup>377</sup> Jowett translates *eidea* as “principles;” Stephen Scully as “forms and aspects” in *Phaedrus* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 2003), 265c-d.

<sup>378</sup> More recent translations thicken the sense of movement between the one and the many Jowett’s translation renders in Socrates’ speech. In *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff translate what Jowett calls “processes of division and generalization” (266b) of which Socrates declares he is a “lover” as “divisions and collections” (266b 542). “Collection” is an act of “seeing together things that are scattered about everywhere and collecting them into one kind” (265d, 542). “Division” is the ability to “cut up each kind according to its species along its natural joints” (265e, 542). In Stephen Scully’s recent translation of *Phaedrus* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 2003), Socrates loves “processes of division and collection.” He renders the one skilled in “collection” “someone whose sight can bring into a single form things which have previously been scattered in all directions so that by defining each thing he makes clear any subject he wants to teach about” (265d, 52). The one who divides has “the power, conversely, to cut up a composition, form by form according to its natural joints” (265e, 52).

<sup>379</sup> Other *OED* definitions for “abstract” bring out the term’s historical nature and situate Stevens’ poetic abstraction alongside the other aesthetic movements of his moment. The noun “abstract” can designate “art which is not founded on an attempt to represent external reality, but rather seeks to achieve an effect on the viewer purely by the use of shape, colour, and texture; of or relating to art of this kind. Also (of an artist, esp. a painter): producing art with these characteristics” (6a) and “music, dance, film, etc., which rejects representation of or reference to external reality, esp. in dispensing with narrative; (originally) spec. designating instrumental music which is not intended to be illustrative or representational in any way” (6b). Stevens’ engagement with visual art throughout his life and career, in evidence in the essay “Relations between Poetry and Painting,” in such poems as his Picasso-inspired “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” and in the letters that detail acquisitions for his personal collection, underscores the significance of these connections. See Edward Ragg, *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010).

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<sup>380</sup> One *OED* entry for the verb conveys gives a sense of this. To “abstract” is “[t]o formulate (an idea, concept, etc.) by isolating the intrinsic properties of something or common characteristics of a number of diverse things, without reference to the peculiar properties of any particular example or instance; to consider (something) in the abstract, independently of its associations or attributes, or separately from something from which it is not physically separable” (*OED* “abstract” v. 5a).

<sup>381</sup> In *Harmonium*, “The Snow Man” and “Nuances on a Theme by Williams” are poems of negative clearing; “Jasmine’s Beautiful Thoughts Underneath the Willow” and “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” poems of creative projection. In the other books, “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz,” “How To Live. What To Do,” “Ideas of Order at Key West,” “Dezembrum,” “Men Made Out of Words,” and many more perform one, the other, or both movements of imagination.

<sup>382</sup> In “The Noble Rider,” Plato yields to his own “gorgeous nonsense,” while we cannot (*CPP*, 644). In the *Notes* (I.iii), “Life’s nonsense pierces us with strange relation” (*CPP*, 331).

<sup>383</sup> As Socrates says to Phaedrus, the “rhetorician, who teaches his pupil to speak scientifically, will particularly set forth the nature of that being to which he addresses his speeches; and this, I conceive, to be the soul.” Jowett translation.

<sup>384</sup> Stevens to Robert Pack, 28 December 1954 (*L* 863-4).

<sup>385</sup> *L* 434.

<sup>386</sup> This mode of general denial punctuated by provisional invention mirrors Socrates’ mode. Socrates offers the narrative of the charioteer and its heavenly vistas to Phaedrus, but declares it an unacceptable fiction as he does so.

<sup>387</sup> Stevens to Henry Church, 18 May 1943. “For the mass of people, it is certain humanism would do just as well as anything else...The chief defect of humanism is that it concerns human beings. Between humanism and something else, it might be possible to create an acceptable fiction” (*L* 449). See also Stevens to Hi Simons, 12 January 1943. “The trouble with humanism is that man as God remains man...” (*L* 434).

<sup>388</sup> Stevens, *Notes*, *CPP*, 337.

<sup>389</sup> Stevens, *Parts of a World*, *CPP*, 223.

<sup>390</sup> Letter to Henry Church. 8 December 1942 (*L* 431).

<sup>391</sup> Stevens, “Theory,” *Harmonium*, *CPP*, 70.

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<sup>392</sup> Stevens anticipates Agamben's "bare life" in this.

<sup>393</sup> Many earlier poems in *Harmonium*, *Ideas of Order*, and *Parts of a World*, and later poems in *Transport to Summer* magnify erotic difficulty. Stevens' entire oeuvre plays over the fulfillments and frustrations of erotic illusion, especially when the object of abstraction is the human lover. *Harmonium* addresses itself often to this subject, as in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "Last Look at the Lilacs," "To the One of Fictive Music," and "Peter Quince at the Clavier." Although these more often celebrate the illusions of love, such poems as "Le Monocle" and "Last Look" treat it with soft and sad irony. Later poems addressed to the same erotic themes bring out the dangers and difficulties of love's abstractions. Among this group is "Farewell to Florida," "Re-statement of Romance," "The Common Life," "Bouquet of Belle Scavoir," "Yellow Afternoon," and "Arrival at the Waldorf."

<sup>394</sup> As his critics frequently note, Stevens knew intimate love's hazards and disappointments well. His marriage to Elsie Moll was not a happy one, and the letters Stevens wrote to her before they married seem to many exercises in dangerous illusion. As this note illustrates, the letters are at least evidence that Stevens indulged in life the erotic illusions he sanctions in his poetry: "How do you look in my thoughts? Oh, you would know yourself at once. You are looking at me and you are smiling and saying something. I can't really hear what you are saying because you laugh in a way before you finish. You are perfectly yourself and that is a little different, I think, although not so very much, from the way you are sometimes when we are together. I wonder whether, in saying that, I haven't stumbled across the reason for our being easier in our letters than we are—when we are together. It must be because you are more perfectly yourself to me when I am writing to you, and that makes me more perfectly myself to you. You know that I do with you as I like in my thoughts: I no sooner wish for your hand than I have it—no sooner wish for anything to be said or done than it *is* said or done; and none of the denials you make me are made there. You are *my* Elsie there.—Yet it is the real Elsie, all the time. I do not think you have ever said or done anything there that the real Elsie wouldn't say or do—only you have not made me beg so hard there.—Now have you seen into my heart?" Stevens to Elsie Moll, 10 March 1907 (*L* 95-6).

<sup>395</sup> *L* 438.

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<sup>396</sup> Paul Valéry, *Dialogues*, Bollingen Series XLV.4, trans. William McCausland Stewart (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1956).

<sup>397</sup> Stevens, "Two Prefaces," *CPP*, 882.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 885.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 880.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 880.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, 882.

<sup>402</sup> Valéry, *Dialogues*, 91-2.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>404</sup> Stevens, "Two Prefaces," *CPP*, 887.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, 889.

<sup>406</sup> Valéry, *Dialogues*, 79-80.